



**ME, A
GENIUS?**
I WAS REBORN
INTO ANOTHER
WORLD AND I
THINK THEY'VE
GOT THE
WRONG IDEA!

2



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NYUN



illust. **SAKANA**

**A MULTI-RACE COALITION FORCE
WAS FORMED?!**

**"WE'LL NEED
YOUR HELP,
KOU."**

**"THAT
TRULY IS AN
INTERESTING
TALE."**

**"WHAT DO
YOU MEAN
WE'RE GOING
TO FIGHT?!"**

**"PLEASE, YOU
MUST MAKE
AN EXCEPTION
FOR THESE
PEOPLE."**

Miki Arakawa

Victoria

Kouki Arakawa

Adrienne



Contents



- 1 Moon Base
- 2 Project Ark
- 3 Political Strategy Team: Let's Negotiate!
- 4 The Multi-Race Coalition Force
- 5 The Day the Devil Hatched
- 6 God-Race Ancient Dragon
- 7 The Path to Ending the War
- 8 A Gift



ME, A GENIUS?
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ANOTHER WORLD AND
I THINK THEY'VE GOT
THE WRONG IDEA!

Shingo Saito

2

Chapter 1: Moon Base

“Are you all sure you’ve got everything you’ll need?” Mom asked me and my usual group of friends.

Who cares about that? I’m dying here in these hot clothes, I wanted to gripe. Why couldn’t I stay behind with Kon?

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s head for the moon! Everyone, get on the shuttle.”

Mom sounded so casual about it. You’d think we were heading to a convenience store as she gestured toward the entrance of the moon exploration shuttle.

I took a good look at the shuttle as I tried to remember how I ended up having to put on this spacesuit and climb into a space shuttle.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Around the time the girls got out of the hot spring, I was preparing a barbecue in front of the entrance to the hot spring area. I was skewering vegetables and pieces of meat when Alice and Aikawa came walking out.

“Kouki, I’m hungry,” Alice said.

I smiled wryly and began roasting the meat that Shingo and I had split between us.

Aikawa wanted to ask us about our summer vacation plans. “What do Kouki and Shin want to do during our summer vacation?”

It’s my summer vacation... I don’t want to do anything. Can’t I just laze around at home?

When I tried suggesting this to Aikawa, she sighed and looked at me as if I was garbage.

But that’s the whole point! Summer vacation is supposed to be about going to sleep in the morning and waking up in the evening!

“I don’t think so, Kouki.” Shingo sighed as if he found me tiresome, too.

I was sure Alice would react the same way as everyone else, so I gave up on the idea. With no one on my side, I went back to roasting the meat as I held back my tears.

“I just remembered,” Shingo said. “They’re going to set up the International Survey Station on the moon this summer.”

“Isn’t Arakawa’s mom in charge of the construction and survey? She’s amazing,” Aikawa replied.

I had no idea. I guess I’ll ask her about it when I get home, I thought. Just then, I heard an email alert sound from the terminal on my arm.

“Kou, next week I’m going to the moon to work on the International Survey Station. I’m sure your friends would like to come along. Please ask them if they’re free next week.”

I was starting to seriously suspect that there were hidden microphones and surveillance cameras around me.

I showed the email to everyone, and they all loved the idea. It left me feeling that I was in for another troublesome experience.

**

We accepted my mom’s invitation and had hastily gotten prepared for the trip. And now here we were.

I took my seat on the shuttle, and adjusted the cooling device of my life-supporting spacesuit to lower the temperature inside the suit.

Memories of the unbearable vibrations I felt last time I’d gone into space on a rocket started to come back to me. Nervously, I asked Mom what it’d be like this time.

“The ballistic missile vibrated so much because it was never designed to carry a person,” she assured me. “This time we’re going to be taking off from a runway and slowly flying toward the stratosphere. Then we’ll escape the atmosphere using boosters. Once we’re in orbit, we’ll receive larger boosters and fuel from a service ship so we can further accelerate. We’ll be accelerating to 120,000 kilometers per hour as we head to the moon.”

Aikawa, who was a space specialist, asked in surprise, “We’re going to exceed the third cosmic velocity?!”

Somehow, I got the impression that we’d be going very fast. Since this was my mom talking, I was worried she might say something like, “We’re going to warp through space,” but I kept that to myself.

I’d just started to eat some cookies that Alice gave me when we heard an announcement: “We will be taking off shortly. For your safety, we ask all passengers to remain seated with your seat belt fastened.”

I fastened my seat belt like I was told, and sat quietly. Before being reincarnated, I’d heard rumors about there being a secret alien base on the far side of the moon. I decided to ask Mom about it.

“At the far side of the moon?” she said. “Yes, we did find a relic, but nothing living.”

“It seriously existed?! Doesn’t that make this top-secret information that shouldn’t be shared with civilians?!”

“Kou, as long as you’re here, you’re not exactly a ‘civilian.’”

“Didn’t you sign a confidentiality agreement before getting on the shuttle, Kouki?” Alice asked.

I don’t remember signing anything like that. I’ll bet Mom submitted all the paperwork without telling me.

The shuttle vibrated slightly, and I could tell we were about to take off. Shuttles that were designed to escape the atmosphere didn’t have any windows, so I couldn’t see what was going on outside.

“Kouki, I’m bored,” Shingo said. “Let’s play a game on our terminals.”

I accepted the invitation from Shingo to play a card game. The world had changed a lot, but playing card games to kill time was as common as ever. I felt a little sentimental as we began using our terminals.

“Wait, isn’t this one too many people?” I said, startled. In addition to Alice, Shingo, Aikawa, and me, a fifth person named “Mii” was being displayed. “Who is this ‘Mii’ person?”

“That’s me!” Mom said.

I started a vote to kick “Mii” from the lobby. The result of the vote was shown on the terminal screen: it was rejected with one vote in favor and three votes against.

Am I the only one who doesn’t want Mom to play with us?! She’s way too old to be playing games with kids!

The game we played was daifugō. Though it was a simple game, Mom was a devastatingly strong player.

Isn’t this game largely luck-based? How can she have won six out of six games?!

Aikawa sounded suspicious as she hesitantly asked my mom, “How did you get so good at this game, Mrs. Arakawa?”

“There’s no need to be so formal, Megumi. Feel free to call me Miki! All I do is remember which cards have been played. That way I know which cards everyone is holding, and I can play the most effective card from my hand based on the most probable outcomes.”

It’s just a game! I wanted to yell. You don’t have to put your

superior mind to it! Save it for something more important. How can you expect anyone else to win a game?

We were all looking at my mom in despair as if we all had the same thought.

Fortunately, we were saved by a well-timed announcement: “Please be advised that we will dock with the service ship five minutes from now.”

I’m just glad I don’t have to play this one-sided game any longer... I thought as I took my seat and fastened my seat belt once again.

Twenty minutes after we docked with the service ship, an elderly man entered the passenger area.

“I’m pleased to meet you all. My name is Daniel Weir. I’m the captain of this shuttle. It’s an honor to be carrying you all to the moon today. I’d like to assure everyone that our safety protocols are flawless, and your trip through space today will be a safe one. However, we will be flying at ultrahigh speeds from this point on, so I must ask everyone to activate their life-support systems and put their helmets on.”

Yeah, all right. What you mean is, “I don’t know what might happen, so put on your spacesuits and sit quietly.” Looks like Mom is causing trouble for him, too. He must feel he has to greet us and explain everything because she’s on board.

I remained silent and listened to the rest of the captain’s explanation. I hoped the experience wouldn’t give him a stomach ulcer.

Moon Exploration Shuttle Captain, Daniel Weir's Point of View

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as I arrived at the conference room for today's flight briefing. As I entered the room, however, I realized that the flight controller had been joined by a woman with the rank of major general. I stopped and saluted her.

Why would a major general be attending a flight briefing? I wondered.

"Lieutenant Colonel Weir, you may sit," she directed.

I followed the major general's request and took a seat on a folding chair.

As I waited to be given my flight briefing, the major general began to speak as an image appeared on a screen. "Lieutenant Colonel, the passengers that you'll be transporting to the moon today are not ordinary people. Take a look at this."

The image made my jaw drop to the floor. I could understand why Miki Arakawa was included in the passenger list; she was leading the construction of the main base and the moon survey. It was the remaining four names that grabbed my attention.

Shingo Saito... Several months earlier, he'd used autonomous AI robots to alter the orbit of an asteroid that was coming close to colliding with Earth, successfully preventing a collision. Even here in the United Nations Space Forces, he was regarded as a hero by many. Myself included.

Alice Alford... The girl who'd developed a drug effective against mankind's greatest enemy, the European tragedy virus. There were many doctors who held extreme admiration for her.

She was rumored to have turned down an invitation from the World Health Organization for a position as a lead researcher.

Megumi Aikawa... Although she hadn't made any particularly notable achievements, she had numerous publications relating to space exploration, and her ideas received high praise for being ingenious yet practical. I'd read several of her publications myself, and my impression was that she was a genius who was likely to lead future space exploration efforts.

But what troubled me most was the last name on the list...
Kouki Arakawa.

He'd successfully developed the eighth-generation powered suit by himself, rescued a passenger ship, and was even rumored to have brought down a ballistic missile by causing it to collide with a measurement drone.

Then last month, he'd flown into space, re-entered Earth's atmosphere, and fiercely attacked an island held by enemy forces, all for the sake of rescuing his abducted girlfriend. He acted as a decoy and managed to hold out until a larger force reached the island.

He wasn't even combat trained, and yet he supported a paratrooper unit that even the United Nations considered elite. By "supported," I mean he single-handedly destroyed every last anti-aircraft installation on the island, saved his girlfriend without their help, and then withdrawn from the island. What's more, the way the nations of the world were abnormally careful in their dealings with Kouki Arakawa made me suspect that there was something more to him—something I wasn't authorized to know.

Is it too late to hand in a letter of resignation and return home safely? I wondered. Being entrusted to transport someone that the world's leaders considered so important felt like too

much pressure. *Flying with these five VIP passengers won't be so bad once we reach space, but how are they going to handle security while we're still on Earth?*

“There is no cause for concern,” the major general told me. “Fortunately, the shuttle has no windows, so once you're in the air, the United Nations can use the full power of their air force to handle security. There will constantly be at least 40 aircraft forming a tight perimeter about the shuttle until you reach the stratosphere. They'll shield the shuttle from any incoming attacks. The security force that ordinarily protects them on Earth will be standing down while another unit takes over.”

“If I recall correctly, the security team at the shuttle's launch site is a special forces unit with specialist training. Is it safe to have them stand down?” I asked. *I've got no use for a team of unspecialized rangers.*

The major general seemed to guess what I was thinking. She grinned and told me, “Security will be handled by a unit belonging to the United Nations Special Operations Division. The name of the unit hasn't been disclosed to me, nor am I authorized to access that information.”

I see. I understand why she's grinning. There's only one unit that not even a major general would be given information about. The “Ghost Unit” rumored to have brought down a nation state single-handedly.

“Lieutenant Colonel, your assignment for today is to escort these five VIPs safely and swiftly to the surface of the moon,” she informed me. “My superiors have also stated that special hospitality is to be given to Kouki Arakawa.”

“Special hospitality” in a military craft? We don't have a beautiful cabin crew on board, and the in-flight meals are

hardly extravagant. That doesn't leave me many options... What does she expect me to do?!

"I'll leave it to you to handle the 'hospitality,' Lieutenant Colonel," she added. "I'll be praying for your success."

She brushed off my remaining questions before making a swift exit. It seemed she was going to leave all the problems for me to deal with.

I think I better call my wife before I leave...

**

Once we reached orbit and docked with the service ship to receive additional boosters, I went to greet the passengers instead of overseeing the operation. I'd been frantically trying to think of some form of hospitality after the major general's departure, but in the end, all I was able to think of was to deliver my usual announcements in person. I stood before a wash basin while I smoothed the creases out of my uniform. Then I put my hat back on before opening the door to the passenger area.

"I'm pleased to meet you all. My name is Daniel Weir. I'm the captain of this shuttle."

Everyone's attention was focused on me as I greeted them.

Mrs. Arakawa... I wish you wouldn't look at me as if you're deciding my worth, I thought unsteadily. That uneasy feeling grew in my stomach as I glanced at the real concern—Kouki Arakawa. He was looking at me as if I had his approval. *Great!*

"It's an honor to be carrying you all to the moon today. I'd like to assure everyone that our safety protocols are flawless, and your trip through space today will be a safe one. However, we will be flying at ultrahigh speeds from this point on, so I must ask every-

one to activate their life-support systems and put on their helmets.”

If anyone managed to hit their head against the walls while we accelerated, my job would be on the line. At best I’d be demoted. More likely, I’d be reassigned to some remote region or perhaps even find myself court-martialed.

I need to stop thinking so negatively. This is really getting me down.

“Up till now, we’ve been using a gravity generator to reproduce the same gravity you’d feel on Earth here in the cabin,” I continued. “However, this generator will be shut off as we accelerate toward the moon. Please store any food or drinks in the special compartments in your seats. In the event of an emergency, the passenger module will detach, and passenger safety will be top priority. In such an event, a rescue ship from Earth will be launched immediately, and you can rest assured that you’ll be rescued within three hours.”

I kept sneaking glances at Kouki throughout my speech. He followed my instructions by fastening his seat belt, storing cookies and a drink in the appropriate places, and checking his life-support system.

I worried that this special hospitality might lead him to make selfish requests, but he appeared to be a decent and down-to-earth young man. He certainly didn’t look like the sort of person who’d take on an armed group single-handedly. I headed back to the cockpit feeling relieved.

The vice-captain, who held the rank of captain, thanked me before asking a strange question. “Thank you for your efforts, Lieutenant Colonel. What sort of person is Kouki?”

I described the impression I’d gotten as straightforwardly as

possible, and the vice-captain listened with an uncomfortable expression. When I asked the vice-captain why he was looking at me like that, he went quiet and tried to avoid the question. I pressed him for an answer.

“I find this hard to believe, too, but...” he began, “one of my friends in the Navy has a friend in the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. So I think this information comes from the self-defense forces. When Kouki was still a child, he made and launched his own cruise missile. Twice, in fact. The second one caused a lot of trouble because it wasn’t intercepted in time. It self-destructed in the end.”

I doubt that! I laughed it off as some overblown rumor, but I was shocked to hear what the vice-captain said next.

“I heard about a rocket that the space forces were tracking after it launched a few years ago. I heard they lost track of it. I wasn’t with the space forces back then, but you must know about it, Lieutenant Colonel?”

It had happened back when I was a major. That incident resulted in an urgent request for all divisions of the space forces to mobilize.

“Maybe. I’m not sure,” I told the vice-captain. I was sure he saw right through me because my hand was shaking.

“Inspection and fitting of additional boosters is complete,” the service ship informed us. “You are ready to launch.”

After receiving that confirmation message, we made an announcement to the passengers while we prepared for the acceleration.

Just as the vice-captain was about to press the ignition button for the boosters, I grabbed his arm to stop him. I decided there’d

be a change of plans.

“Set the shuttle’s engine output to max first. We can fire the boosters after that. Let’s make our acceleration more gradual. Passenger safety is the priority, so I think we should avoid rapid acceleration.”

The vice-captain understood what I was thinking, and he quietly obeyed. The vice captain’s hand also began to shake, but I couldn’t laugh about it. We would no doubt be killed if we allowed our passengers to be harmed in any way.

But by whom?

I didn’t want to think about it. I fired the booster so the shuttle would accelerate gradually.

There were suddenly G-forces acting on my body, but the effect was small thanks to the operation of my spacesuit. We weren’t rapidly accelerating from zero like we normally would, so the load was less burdensome than usual.

After four hours of flying, we got into communication with the moon base.

“This is the moon base control tower. We have identified your craft. Please land while following the navigation signal. The current temperature is -170°C and there is a clear sky.”

The female controller joked about the temperature and weather, but we didn’t have time to joke around. Every last bit of my concentration was dedicated to carefully landing the shuttle.

I’m concentrating here! Don’t distract me!

“Vice-captain, lower the landing gear,” I ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

I brought the shuttle down for a much gentler landing than normal, then I shut off the engines. All that remained was to wait for the vehicle that was going to transport everyone to the moon base to dock with the shuttle entrance. Now that the job was finally finished, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lieutenant Colonel... it’ll be our duty to carry him back to Earth...” the vice-captain said with tears in his eyes.

I’ll write my resignation letter when I get to the base, I decided.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

Once the shuttle landed, we boarded the transportation vehicle that carried us into the moon base. There, I saw a main hall so vast that I found it hard to believe the base was still under construction. I looked about me in amazement.

Mom clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "Okay, everyone, let me explain these cards I'm about to give you. These are the security cards you'll use inside the base. If you lose your card, you won't be able to go anywhere. Keep them around your neck even when you're sleeping. The cards I'm giving the four of you will provide maximum clearance. That means you can go anywhere within the base. But don't go anywhere dangerous without permission, and don't go outside the base. Don't go walking around on the moon's surface, in other words. I'm giving you all this level of clearance because I trust you all. Don't disappoint me."

I'm really not that stupid, I thought. Neither are my friends.

"You're going to be staying here for two weeks," she added. "For security reasons, you'll all be staying in rooms in the same section of the base. This shouldn't cause too much inconvenience, but I'd like you all to conserve water as best you can while considering how much water has been brought here and how well our recirculating system works. The most important thing is that you always show up to roll call at 7 AM and 7 PM. I'd like everyone to be gathered in the dining hall before the roll call begins. And then there's... well... just ask me what to do whenever you're not sure."

That last part sounded like a cop-out! Though I suppose there's no need to answer every question right now.

Mom guided each of us to the rooms we'd been allocated.

I left my luggage in my room and headed to the dining hall. There, we planned out what we'd do next. Aikawa would probably go along with the moon survey team. Shingo would probably go to see the new machinery. I suspected that Alice would head to a separate research facility where they were researching bacteria and viruses in space.

"What about you, Kouki? Have you decided what you're going to do?" Alice asked.

You shouldn't have to ask... there's only one place I'm going!! I thought. "I was thinking I'd go see the relic on the far side of the moon."

Everyone was looking at me as if they were expecting me to say just that.

But isn't it awesome?! I wanted to cry. I might not get another chance to see a relic left behind by an unknown life form!

"Buh hee. How about we all spend two or three days doing our own thing, starting tomorrow?" Shingo said finally.

With that, we dispersed for the day.

**

The next day, after the morning roll call, I talked to Mom about going to see the relic. I thought she'd be reluctant, but she gave me permission surprisingly easily.

"I was sure you'd want to see it," she told me with a smile. "I've already made preparations."

I should have known Mom would be two steps ahead and have everything prepared before I even mentioned it.

“The truth is, we haven’t quite finished studying the relic,” she added. “So far, all we know is that it’s not harmful to humankind. We haven’t even been able to access the interior. The place that looks like the entrance has markings on it that could be written language, but we haven’t been able to learn much. We’ve tried using explosives, but we couldn’t even put a scratch on the entrance. When you see it, let me know if it means anything to you.”

If my genius mom can’t make sense of it, I’ve got no chance. Though it would be nice if I could be useful somehow. “Leave it to me,” I told Mom.

**

I equipped a reinforced exoskeleton as I’d been instructed, and I waited in the lobby. My mom and a stern-faced, middle-aged guy, who looked as though he was in the military, appeared wearing the same type of exoskeletons.

“C’est agreable de vous rencontrer,” the middle-aged guy said to me when I looked at him.

I had no idea what he was saying. It sounded like French. He seemed to realize that I didn’t know how to respond, and he pressed the switch on his neck.

“Is my machine translator working? Do you understand me now?”

“Oh? Oooh!” With just a slight delay, I heard a synthetic voice every time the middle-aged guy spoke. It seemed as though a microphone installed in his exoskeleton was picking up his voice and automatically translating his words. “I hear you! I was a little surprised.”

“Haha. Everyone is shocked when they first see this device in action. Did you know that your mother developed it?”

Seriously?! Mom is amazing. I looked over at Mom, and she was smiling kindly as always as I met her eye. She looked away as if embarrassed.

“I’m told you want to go to the moon relic,” the middle-aged guy said, reaching out to shake my hand. “I’ll be your guide. Make sure you get a good look!”

I smiled wryly at this oddly enthusiastic man. My head was filled with thoughts of the unexplored relic.

**

Moon Base Security Unit Member Cedric's Point of View

“First of all, could you put this on?”

I gave Kouki a powered suit designed for exploring the moon's surface. He gave the equipment a look over before putting it on. Most likely, he wanted to be sure the suit his life would depend on was fit for purpose. I'd received detailed documents concerning Kouki from Mrs. Arakawa, so I had a rough idea of what to expect.

“My son won't compromise on anything. It's one of his good points, but it does cause some problems,” she'd told me. She gave me a serious look while handing over those documents.

At first, I'd thought it strange everyone was making such a big deal over a child; but when I looked at those documents, I'd been blown away. Many called Kouki a genius, and they were absolutely right.

This boy named Kouki had conceived of new theories, developed new technologies, and shown himself capable in a military capacity. There was nothing he couldn't do. Over the course of ten years, the technology of this world advanced rapidly, and it was all due to this one boy standing before me.

“Is everything all right?” I asked Kouki after he finished putting on the suit.

At a glance, nothing seemed to be wrong, but I needed to make a final check that the suit was operating correctly.

“Kouki, there's something similar to a terminal attached to your arm,” I added. “Use that to check whether your suit is operating normally. You can operate it using the hand of the suit or

from the inside. I'd like you to take a look at it."

"If it's supposed to be green, then there's no problem," he said.

"Yes. Green is good. The smallest malfunction could cost your life out on the moon's surface. If an indicator turns yellow, inform me immediately. If anything turns red, abandon your suit and just keep the exoskeleton."

That seemed to be everything I needed to explain. There was no need to worry about his mother, so that just left the equipment we'd be taking. We needed to be armed while heading to the relic in case we needed to defend ourselves. I suspected that Kouki had experience using weapons. I briefly considered that letting him carry a weapon himself might be the safest option. On the other hand, giving a weapon to a beginner would be dangerous.

While I was still thinking it over, Mrs. Arakawa sent me a transmission using a secret communication channel: "Please leave all defense-related matters to me."

How could she know what I'm thinking?! It scared me a little, so I had to force a smile before replying. "As for the survey equipment... I suppose basic equipment will do. Kouki, if there's nothing in particular you need, are you good to go?"

"I'm ready! I'm looking forward to it." His smile was what you'd expect from a boy of that age.

Seeing him smile like that was enough to make someone think even this assignment on the barren surface of the moon surface wasn't so bad.

**

We rode on a transportation shuttle for an hour.

Kouki spent the entire time sitting quietly, but now he suddenly began operating his terminal. He didn't seem to be able to find the information he wanted, so he sent me a transmission: "How can I see how much oxygen I have left?"

"There's a time and percentage shown on the right arm of the exoskeleton. That tells you how long you can continue operating with your remaining oxygen and how much is left. It can last another 30 hours because it has a re-circulating device, but it's a little difficult to estimate a precise time because of differences between individuals."

I can't believe I didn't tell him about that until now. I'd forgotten to mention it because it normally would have been taught during basic training. Feeling guilty, I asked whether he had any other questions.

"Are there any reports describing the relic?" he asked.

I shook my head. All that was known was that prominent researchers from Earth had puzzled over the mysterious hieroglyphics. The relic was nothing but an entrance-like structure with those hieroglyphics written around it.

The pilot announced, "We will arrive shortly," and we prepared to disembark.

We weren't expecting any danger, but the security team had gone ahead, just in case. It had been decided that the shuttle would land after the surrounding area was confirmed to be safe. I watched as three members of my team descended to the surface through a hatch.

"Please limit all communications to this frequency," I told Kouki. "Remember that personal communications are generally forbidden."

“I understand.”

He seemed to have some trouble changing the frequency, but he managed to change it correctly. Several minutes later, the team that had descended contacted me to say there were no problems, and I landed the shuttle. The shuttle came to a complete stop, and everyone climbed out. We traveled with Kouki and Mrs. Arakawa surrounded by our team. Eventually, we arrived in front of the relic. One of my team members thought ahead and brought a handheld light source, which he shined on the writing on the relic.

Kouki stood silent while staring at the writing for some time.

“Stand at the end and push on this wall?” he said quietly to himself. “Wait, no. It says to knock.”

“Kou?! You can read it?!” Mrs. Arakawa looked as surprised as I felt.

It can't be... This writing has been a mystery to humankind ever since the relic was discovered 150 years ago. Is he claiming to have deciphered it in such a short time?!

Kouki turned to look at us and asked, “What should I do? Should I open it?”

I could never have guessed that I'd be witnessing such a major event in mankind's history.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After getting off the shuttle, the middle-aged guy and his team surrounded us while escorting us to the site of the relic.

Just as I was thinking, *It's so dark that I can't even see anything!* one of the people surrounding us lit a lamp, making the relic easy to see.

So these are the mysterious "hieroglyphics." They were exactly what I expected I'd see, and it was hard not to laugh. I understood why academics and archaeologists would have trouble reading such writing.

These were pictures.

I thought of it in the shuttle when they told me about the "hieroglyphics." *Would a life form with technology advanced enough to be capable of interstellar travel and construction on other planets really use "writing" to announce their existence to lower forms of life, such as humans?* I'd thought. *It wouldn't be my first choice.*

Such an advanced society would use pictures to communicate so that they could be understood.

The real reason no one had been able to read it was down to the way the pictures were read. Ordinarily... ordinarily on Earth, at least... you'd read from left to right or right to left. Occasionally you'd read from top to bottom. But you'd never read anything the way the writing on this relic was read: diagonally starting from the top with a change in direction halfway down.

Academics from Earth talked about humankind as if it was a supreme life form, but we were nothing more than amoebas in

the eyes of the life form that had built this relic. That closed-minded thinking was what made it difficult for them to think in new ways.

It definitely wasn't my lack of common sense that allowed me to read it! That's not what it was!

"Stand at the end and push on this wall?" I wondered. "Wait, no. It says to knock."

"Kou?! You can read it?!" Mom said excitedly as I was deciphering the message.

Give me a minute. I'm still working it out. Let's see... Stand at the end and knock, then press down on the lower right part... The reading direction changes here, so I need to figure out which is the next part. After some time, I came to understand how to open it.

I turned to everyone and asked, "What should I do? Should I open it?"

I wanted to open it and charge in right away. The relic had probably been left here to prove the existence of its creators; it seemed unlikely that it would harm other creatures. Rationally, an intelligent life form capable of creating a culture was unlikely to attack without a good reason. If they did attack another creature, it might have means of fighting back, so there'd be a possibility of a counterattack if the other creature was sufficiently advanced.

My heart was racing as I waited for them to respond.

"What do you think, Kou? Do you think it's safe?" Mom asked, sounding concerned.

I shared the thoughts I just had. Mom agreed, but the middle-

aged guy was uncertain.

“If you think there’s a possibility of danger, wouldn’t it be best to turn back right away?” he asked.

Mom turned to him and proposed a compromise. He agreed and told his team that we were going to open the door. His team drew their weapons so they’d be ready if there was trouble, and I began the operation for opening it.

Stand at the right end, tap on the right part three times, and then do the same thing while standing at the opposite side.

The pictures began to shine with a blue light, and the door opened by moving diagonally right and upward.

Now I see... The race that made this is fond of diagonal movement. I resisted the urge to laugh as I stepped inside.

The path in front of me headed downward. There were similar pictures drawn on the walls inside.

“Looks like we should go straight ahead. I’m not totally sure, but the writing seems to say, ‘We mean you no harm.’”

“Kouki, can you really understand the writing in such detail?” the middle-aged guy asked nervously.

The pictures near the entrance showed a life form opening the door and throwing away its weapons. There was also another life form inviting it in. I simply nodded and continued on.

After continuing for some time, we found another picture. This time, the life form that had been invited was holding a weapon, causing the other life form to stop.

“It says, ‘You’ll get a surprise when you open this door, but

don't carelessly use any weapons.' Tell your team not to open fire carelessly."

"U-Understood."

Once I had his agreement, I opened the door. Inside, a blue-haired woman was sitting on a chair, smiling.

This really is a surprise! If it hadn't been for the warning, I might have lost my nerve. In the corner of my eye, I saw someone from the middle-aged guy's team attempting to draw his weapon, but he was stopped by a kick from my mom.

"Didn't you hear what my son told you?" she told him, sounding a little frightened.

I was glad she stopped him from firing, but this was our first contact with an alien. *Stop making Earth look bad!!* I wanted to scream. I didn't know what to do.

The woman spoke for the first time. "Nice to meet you, Earthlings." She greeted us with a clear voice.

Huh? Wait a minute. That's not a synthetic voice! Is she actually speaking Japanese?!

The woman laughed and continued speaking. "You're the one who opened the door, Kouki Arakawa. That makes you the owner of this place. It's only natural that we should converse in your language."

I might have opened the door, but I didn't ask to own the place, I thought, astonished. And how do you know my name?! And how can you speak Japanese?! During this kind of close encounter, you'd expect to communicate by gestures or something. That said, this is a lot more convenient, so I shouldn't complain.

“I can speak Japanese because I’ve been collecting information regarding Earth,” she said. “If you wish, we could speak in the language of my race, but it would take you some time to learn to understand it.”

Hey... I didn't even say anything. How did you guess what I was thinking? Can you read my mind?

“I can’t read something as unpredictable as a person’s mind in detail,” the woman said. “I’m only able to read your most surface-level thoughts.”

Okay. I get it, so please stop. Humans are a life form that communicate using sounds known as words. Humans can't deal with this sort of behavior.

“Understood. In that case, let’s use our words. Before we begin any detailed discussion, why don’t you remove your suit? This place has an environment similar to Earth’s.”

I was about to remove my powered suit just as she’d suggested, but Mom stopped me.

She insisted it could be dangerous, but the woman promised to speak with humans using words. It seemed only natural that we should show respect in turn.

Mom thought about it for some time, and then said, “Let me remove mine first.”

But then the middle-aged guy with the security team said, “No, I should go first, to ensure your safety.”

This was starting to bother me, so I went ahead and removed my suit, my exoskeleton, and also my helmet. I breathed the air in deeply.

The woman looked shocked. “You actually removed it...” she said. “I was under the assumption that Earthlings were more scheming creatures.”

“Some of us are like that. But the majority aren’t,” I replied.

She smiled and nodded.

This woman reminded me of my mom somehow. Perhaps that was why I felt I could trust her.

After checking that everyone else followed my example and removed their suits, I thought about what question to ask.

I consulted with Mom, and she said, “Ask her what you want to ask.”

So I started by asking who she was.

That’s how we heard the sad story of how a race living in a particular galaxy set out on a long voyage with no destination.

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What She Said

In the present year, 2102, the furthest away celestial body detected by humans is named “MACS0647-JD.”

It’s roughly 32.2 billion light years from Earth. Even with a space telescope, only the faintest glimpse of that celestial body can be seen.

Beyond even that, 128 billion light years from Earth, there’s a galaxy containing a planet resembling Earth, where intelligent life forms once lived. For convenience, we’ll call that planet “Adam.”

A life form that was carbon-based, similar to humans, lived on the planet for 8.2 billion years. These residents of Adam then began to explore outer space through a process of trial and error.

They found new substances and new celestial bodies. They battled against the threat of the unknown, and continued to search for an intelligent life form similar to themselves. Their goal was the preservation of their own kind, and the reinvigoration of their declining culture.

2,800 years had passed since the start of their search, and they discovered that the third planet from the sun in a star system 128 billion light years away from their own planet was capable of supporting intelligent life. When they visited that planet, intelligent life had yet to form there. However, they believed that such life would someday arise, and they decided to leave behind a structure on the far side of the planet’s moon that would prove their existence to those life forms.

They used pictures to communicate instructions for opening the structure. They did so rather than text because these would be easily understood when those life forms formed and were able to

reach their moon by their own power.

“You are not alone. You have friends in a faraway galaxy.”

This is what the residents of Adam were trying to communicate.

They themselves had been completely alone. Since setting out, they spent 3,000 years unable to find high-level life.

Once the structure was completed, the residents of Adam came to a realization: “This star system was only recently formed. There are many asteroids here. If just one of them were to collide with the third planet from the sun...”

Feeling the need to protect these unknown children, they decided to alter the orbit of their moon. They moved the moon so it would act as a shield to the third planet, stabilized its orbit, and thickened the surface of its far side to be able to withstand meteorites.

To further protect against asteroids and meteorites flying toward the central star, they constructed a control base on the second-biggest satellite of the sixth planet, later named “Saturn.” They manipulated gravity such that meteors flying around the sixth planet formed rings.

Finally, an artificially created life form was left behind to act as overseer, and the people of Adam left the star system.

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The woman speaking to us called herself “Eve.”

I realized that the moon really did have a convenient orbit about the Earth, and the moon had never shown its far side. Based on her story, I was certain that Eve was the overseer she’d

mentioned. Would the people of Adam someday be back to interact with the people of Earth?

“No, that won’t happen,” Eve told me.

“But why not? They’ve done so much to create the right environment on Earth. Why won’t they visit it?”

Eve looked sad as she continued, “The people of Adam were wiped out approximately 600 million years ago.”

“Seriously? I can’t understand how a race capable of traveling for over 100 billion light years could be wiped out. What could have happened to them? Was there a great war?”

“I will explain,” she said. “But I’d like to ask two favors of you once my story is over.”

I promised that I’d grant her requests if I could, and urged her to continue.

The history of Adam that she recited to us was beyond our imagining.

“While returning home to Adam from Earth, the outer space exploration fleet received a transmission that had been sent from Adam several hundred years prior: ‘Our star is showing signs of going supernova. Fleets should cease returning to this star and instead meet with the migration fleet at a specific location.’ The exploration fleet therefore changed course for the specified location.”

Being able to produce a fleet capable of interstellar travel for the sake of migrating was an incredible scientific achievement. What’s more, it sounded as though the ships contained cities that could operate for thousands of years.

“The exploration fleet arrived at the location and searched for other ships. Though they expected to find tens of thousands of ships gathered there, there was only a single wrecked migration ship. Inside that ship, barely anyone was left alive. They found a ship log stating the star had gone supernova sooner than expected, and the people of Adam hadn’t escaped in time. Although there had been another migration ship that was fortunate enough to escape the explosion, that ship had been built in haste and used ‘alternate dimensional travel’—a type of short-range warp. The ship’s alternate dimensional travel system didn’t work correctly. They disappeared, and their whereabouts are now unknown.”

I wondered how the crew of the exploration fleet must have felt when they had nowhere to return to, and that they’d lost their people. They’d been struck by tragedy just when they had been ready to proudly announce the discovery of Earth. I couldn’t imagine.

“The exploration fleet took in the survivors from the migration fleet and decided to return to Earth. The 40,000 people of Adam that remained had chosen to make the star system of Earth their new home. So that they could coexist with any earthlings that might arise, they chose to build their base on Mars, where they’d be close to the Earth.

“Your people found evidence of water on Mars while investigating it with unmanned craft, didn’t they? Those were the remains of the water that the people of Adam carried there from Earth. They expected that their efforts to terraform Mars would be a great success, but tragedy once again struck the people of Adam.”

They could have just lived on Earth, I realized. They didn’t have to go to the trouble of terraforming Mars and living separately from humans. Protecting other races must have been very

important to them.

“The people of Adam detected a higher-dimension corridor on the outskirts the solar system,” Eve said. “A higher-dimension corridor is something like a moving black hole. They had long been aware that such things existed, but the chances of actually encountering one were minuscule. To have one arise close to a planet capable of supporting life was something no one could have foreseen. The people of Adam desperately sought a solution.

“They hypothesized that if they allowed the power systems of their interstellar ship to overload in the vicinity of the corridor, there was a possibility that the corridor would dissipate. But then where could they go? The terraforming of Mars wasn’t finished, so they couldn’t settle there. Destroying the ecosystem of Earth and preventing life from developing wasn’t an option. They were left to choose between two extremes.”

After hearing this much, anyone could guess exactly how they’d been wiped out. There was visible tension on the face of everyone except Eve. I was sure I was making that same face.

“They had to choose between their own species, the people of Adam, who were low in number and whose culture was in continual decline, and a new species that hadn’t yet arisen but was highly likely to appear. When they weighed one against the other, they chose to protect the future of the new species. They left a message with me, the controller, to give to that life form when it finally found its way here. Then, they went to be with the rest of their kind.

“Please don’t look so down, everyone. The people of Adam did not intend to be seen as tragic heroes. They were proud that they could protect the Earth. Now that Earthlings have actually arrived here, there is meaning in their sacrifice.”

It's all thanks to them that we can live our lives on Earth, I thought, moved. They must have been an incredible race.

I doubted that humankind would ever be able to choose the future of another species over itself.

I looked at Mom and the middle-aged guy; I wanted their approval before asking to hear the message. They both nodded.

For the first time since Eve had begun her tale, I spoke. "Would it be possible for us to hear that message?"

"Of course," she said. "As a representative of the people of Adam, I am to give the message to a representative of the Earthlings. I will interpret as this video plays."

Eve stood up from her chair, and appeared to operate something in the space near her hands. The image of a blue-haired man suddenly appeared in front of Eve, and a video began playing.

"Greetings. I'm sure Eve has told you about my people. If you're watching this video, your culture has advanced to the point that you're able to reach the moon by your own power. That brings me great joy.

"I don't know how many thousands or millions of years will pass before you view this video, but I want you to remember... we once existed. And although we were never able to find them, I'm certain that other races exist in the vastness of space. You are not alone.

"It will take some time, but if you're able, we'd like you to inherit our dream. Achieve a peaceful coexistence with the other races that are out there somewhere. This is the one countermeasure against your inevitable decline. We will give you the records of our voyage in hope that they will be of some use. There's not

much time remaining, but I'd like to say one final thing: Glory to our heirs who will continue our exploration of space."

Incredible, I thought, astonished. Compared to humankind, they are on another level. The people of Adam are what you'd call a higher race.

Everyone was moved to tears, even the middle-aged guy. My eyes were welling up, too. I was ready to do everything I could to grant Eve's requests.

"Could you tell us your requests, Eve?" I asked her.

Eve smiled in a way that reminded me of my mom, and shared her requests. "First, I'd like you to fulfill the wish of the people of Adam to the best of your ability. My second request is for the owner, Kouki Arakawa. I'd like you to revoke my authority as controller."

I understand that first request, but why would I take away her authority? I thought, shocked. What good would that do? Being the overseer shouldn't stop her coming back to Earth with us now that humankind has advanced somewhat.

"I want to go home," she explained. "Back to the planet where my people once lived."

But that planet is gone. Why go back now?

Mom said, "But Eve, your home is..."

"Yes, I understand that. I don't even know whether my ship can take me that far. And I don't know when I'll arrive. But even so, I want to be close to my home."

If the last remaining survivor of the people of Adam wanted to return home, who was I to stop her?

“I hereby revoke your authority,” I told her.

She thanked me, appearing to be overjoyed. No one could blame her for wanting freedom after protecting this place alone for over 600 million years. I was overcome with emotion as I watched Eve prepare to return.

“What’ll you do with this old place?” Eve asked me, twirling her hair. “It’s not like I’m gonna be using it.”

Huh?! A moment ago she was this beautiful woman with a tragic past. What just happened?! She’s standing there playing with her hair as she talks to me... She reminds me of a certain type of girl you’d find on Earth.

“I don’t need it, either,” I replied, not sure what to think.

“That figures. A place like this is a bit of a problem because it’s so hard to get to, right? You know, if they wanted to be generous, they could’ve easily left you an interstellar ship behind.”

I don’t know what to say. The atmosphere changed so suddenly. I looked over to the middle-aged guy for help, but he looked just as bewildered as me.

I looked over at Mom...

She’s gone! Huh? Where’d she run off to?

“Eve, what’s this?” Mom asked.

“Oh, that? It’s a scope for looking into other dimensions,” Eve said carelessly. “Kinda like those periscopes you’ve got on Earth. Actually, Miki, wasn’t it you who discovered that Arakawa particle thing? That was impressive.”

“Can I have it?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. I just kept it as, like, an antique. I don’t actually use it. Oh right, I forgot... it’s Kouki who’s got authority to give activation commands to all this stuff now. If you wanna use it, you need his permission.”

What’s going on here?! Mom’s fishing for mementos while they have a girly chat. And why’s Eve talking like a kid? Isn’t she a 600 million-year-old gra—

“Finish that thought, and I’m throwing you out into the vacuum.”

Stop reading my mind!

My head was starting to hurt, so I went and sat in the corner with the security team while I waited for my mom to be satisfied.

The issue of what to do with this place was a real problem. Although Eve described the place as being “a problem because it’s so hard to get to,” I thought the problem was more that humankind wasn’t ready for it. We were a race that would fight against our own kind, nation against nation. It was too soon for us to know about this place. In order to be ready, we would need to start thinking of ourselves as Earthlings.

“You’re right. I had the same thought,” Eve said. “After watching over humankind up till now, I don’t like the idea of giving you our technology. You’d go and start a war with it and wipe yourselves out. You can destroy what’s here; there are still other bases on Titan and inside Pluto. Go find those.”

“We’ll do just that,” I said. “Let’s destroy everything here when Eve leaves. Is everyone okay with that?”

“Indeed,” Mom said. “Although we can’t be trusted with it, we do realize how dangerous this place is. It’s best to leave these things alone until we’re ready to accept such technology.”

We spoke with the middle-aged guy and his team about erasing the data on their suits' recording devices. Finally, Mom returned, satisfied.

It was time for Eve to return to her home.

Before climbing into her one-person shuttle, Eve looked back and told me, "I'm glad it was you who came, Kouki. If it'd been anyone else, things could've gotten tricky."

"I'm nothing special, honestly," I said. "It's not like I'm free from greed. It's just that, even if it makes life easy, I don't want excessive power."

She smiled just like she had in the moment I first saw her. "But you know, Kouki, though you may not have done it on purpose, aren't the things you've created up to now a little more than what your people are ready for? I know all about it. A while ago, you made an artificial black hole, didn't you? Our people called that an imaginary number bomb. We considered them the ultimate weapon."

Wha?! I don't remember making— Oh, that? When Shingo and I were heating up some food, I got a little excited and said, "We can use particle collisions to generate heat! Could that heat our food?" Did I really make something so dangerous?!

"All I'm saying is, keep advancing your culture, but don't get reckless. I hope I'll see you again sometime!"

With that, Eve gave me a quick kiss on the lips and climbed into her shuttle.

Is she crazy?! Though that was kind of nice!

"That's to thank you for relieving me of my duty," she added. "Bye bye!"

Before I could complain, her shuttle shot off and disappeared from view.

We should be getting back, too... I thought slowly.

Once we left, the relic would be destroyed and buried deep underground. Re-excavating it would be a practical impossibility. We left the relic by following the same route we'd taken when we came in.

"Kou, I want you to tell me more about this imaginary number bomb later," Mom said to me via a transmission.

That sounded like trouble, so I tried to find some way out of it, but Mom made some vague threats related to Alice, so I gave up and promised I'd tell her.

Come to think of it, Alice might not mind, but when I tell Aikawa about this, she's going to be so disappointed that she missed it. I just know there'll be trouble.

I tried to imagine her reaction as I stared out, via my suit's cameras, into the endless void of space.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

Using the terminal in the room I'd been allocated, I tried to establish a connection with Earth.

I could never have imagined that we'd make our first contact with alien life on the moon. I had to discuss this with Shuuichi.

"Connecting..." appeared on the screen, and after some time, a tired-looking Shuuichi appeared.

"Miki? What is it?"

"Kouki opened the relic on the moon." I summarized the important points. "Inside the relic, we found a life form who claimed to be from a race that originated on another planet and was destroyed 600 million years ago. We were able to communicate with her."

Shuuichi knitted his brow as he lit a cigarette.

Did he start smoking more cigarettes again?

"Well, whose fault is that?" Shuuichi shot back when I expressed concern.

I'd rather you didn't blame other people for your lack of self-control.

Shuuichi looked troubled, and he raised his hand to silence me before I could make further complaints. He said he wanted to know why I was calling him.

"First, I need to know, is this line secure?" I asked him.

"That's not a problem. Clare always checks carefully, so there's

no need to worry.”

Clare... I remembered that she worked in intelligence. Shuichi took great care to monitor the performance of his people, so if he said there was no need to worry, I had no doubt she was more than competent. I was satisfied by his response.

“Information relating to the opening of the relic and the information we found inside are covered by a gag order. The unit that came with me were my own people, so I’m not worried about them. The problem is the artifacts we found in the relic, and the fact that the relic now belongs to Kouki. I’m sending you more information. Please take a look.”

I sent the data and waited for Shuichi to finish reading it, while trying to make sense of the situation in my own head.

The ownership of the relic itself wasn’t a substantial problem. The relic had already been destroyed and buried deep underground. Even if this came to light, we could insist that it had been destroyed in an unfortunate accident.

The problem was the artifacts. I brought them back with me so they wouldn’t be a problem if the relic was somehow re-excavated. Each of these items had the power to destroy the balance of society. Humankind wasn’t ready for interdimensional scopes or blueprints for new spacecraft. That woman, Eve, had been right to say that they would lead to a major war. And it was Kouki who had the power to activate each item.

It was easy to imagine a fierce competition to control Kouki. As his mother, I wanted to give Kouki an ordinary life until he graduated from the academy, at the very least.

“You’re right,” Shuichi said when he finished reading. “This is bad. I think the technology would be safe in your hands or in the hands of your people, but the majority of people would use

those to become rich or for military purposes.”

“That’s what I thought,” I agreed. “And Kouki is involved. I won’t let this disrupt his life.”

“If I know you, you’ve already thought of a plan.”

I told Shuuichi the details of the plan I’d been thinking of for some time.

“Are you serious?” he asked once I’d finished.

“I’m serious. We can do this,” I replied.

For a while, Shuuichi looked deep in thought. He told me he’d have to discuss this with his subordinates, and that he’d call me back later. We ended the call.

I’ll have to discuss this with some of my own people too... I thought.

I looked at the screen once again, and made another call to Earth to discuss my plans.

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Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

After finishing my call with Miki, I made a request to Clare. Two hours from now, I needed all personnel to convene at the Hakone base. Including those that were off duty.

Then I took a look around the base with Clare.

Although it was still under construction, it was overwhelming to see this vast geofront 800 meters underground.

“The first level is approximately 15 kilometers wide,” Clare commented. “It’s hard to believe we’re underground. Without the small-scale cold fusion reactor that your wife invented, none of this would be possible.”

“That’s another thing that was mostly designed by Kouki,” I told Clare with a wry smile.

Seeing her shocked reaction reminded me that that was classified information.

“Forget what I just told you,” I ordered her as we headed to see another location.

We arrived at the weapon storage section. A group of researchers who I supposed were working for Miki were testing a powered suit. It was a prototype suit equipped with flight thrusters. We watched as it flew unsteadily and then crashed to the ground.

“You must be Mr. Arakawa,” one of the researchers called out to me. “I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t notice you until now.”

“Don’t worry about it. What’s this thing?” I asked, pointing to the powered suit.

The researcher sounded embarrassed as he laughed and told me, “Well, we’re trying to copy the eighth-generation suit that Kouki and his friends made, but it’s not going very well. We’re using brain signals as the control method, but we still can’t seem to stabilize the orientation during flight. As you can see, it tends to crash. I’ve concluded that the only reason Kouki can fly it is his talent. I suspect that he excels when it comes to understanding the space around him, balancing the suit, and piloting it.”

That’s another thing to add to Kouki’s list of talents. I wonder what his future plans are. I’ve never known anyone with enough talent to be a first-rate researcher and a first-rate soldier.

“You’ll have to excuse me. We’ve just received an urgent request to attend a meeting from Mrs. Arakawa.” The researcher walked off high-speed. It seemed as though Miki had already begun to act.

I returned to my quarters for a while and drank coffee with Clare while we waited for my subordinates to gather.

The two of us talked until the message appeared on my terminal: “Personnel are now gathered.”

As I was about to step into the conference room where everyone was, Clare said, “Please don’t worry. We’ll follow the commander’s lead, whatever happens.”

Clare had good intuition, and although she didn’t know the details, she probably had some idea of I was going to say.

I headed into the conference room without replying.

When I entered, all of our people were sitting, grouped into teams. They all stood and saluted when they saw me.

I saluted in return and climbed onto the podium. Clare stood beside me.

“Everyone, take your seats. All teams report absences,” she ordered.

I could tell just by looking that no one was absent. But a formal check was required to keep things organized, so I had to wait until all teams had reported.

“No absences. All 350 personal have gathered.”

I nodded in response and took another look at my subordinates.

We’ve fought together through so many battles...

They’d fought with me in Africa when supplies couldn’t reach us and we were drinking muddy water. We completed a reconnaissance-in-force operation at the North Pole while shivering in temperatures so low that it was impossible to sleep. We provided humanitarian aid to countries in the Middle East while dealing with guerrilla fighters that could have attacked at any time. There’d been 1,200 of us when we’d first formed, but this was all that was left now. The soldiers of the supposed strongest unit were now down to 352 survivors, Clare and myself included.

How can anyone call us the strongest? The only reason we’ve gotten so far is because of those who willingly gave their lives so that the rest of us could live on. And now I’m going to betray them all because of my love for my son.

“Gentlemen,” I said while trying to stop my voice from trembling. “I think... I’m going to be leaving the United Nations forces.”

I could see they were unsettled by my announcement. It was

so sudden that they were bound to be shocked. I gave them a moment before continuing.

“This morning, I received a proposal from my wife, Miki Arakawa, relating to my son. I can’t give you all of the details, but I’ve decided to accept her proposal. The proposal isn’t something I can go along with while I’m still with the United Nations forces.”

I looked at Clare, and I saw that she was listening quietly. I looked at Louis, who was both the vice commander of our unit and the commander of squad B. He was deep in thought with his arms folded.

“I want you to consider my leaving the United Nations forces to be something that’s already decided,” I said. “What I’d really like to discuss is that I’d like to have some of you come with me, if possible. I obviously can’t force you. I can’t even reveal the details of the proposal to anyone until they agree to come with me. I have to ask that you make your decision without any information. I realize how unfair that is, but I’m begging you.” I bowed my head as I finished my statement.

I could hear people discussing it with those sitting near to them.

At most, four or five people will come with me... but we need all the help we can get for what we’re planning.

I raised my head once again to tell them I’d be giving them time to think.

“I don’t need to hear a decision now. I’ll return in an hour. Anyone who has no intention of leaving the United Nations forces, please leave this room. Before I leave the United Nations forces, I’ll be sure to report that your performance was first rate, so it won’t cause problems for you. Don’t be concerned about that.”

I was about to leave the room when someone sitting with Squad C called out to me: “Commander, this is a waste of time. Please tell us about the proposal and when we’ll be leaving the United Nations.”

The man speaking called out in an unreasonably loud voice. I remembered that his name was Rodriguez.

What does he mean, a waste of time? I was left speechless.

“No matter how long you give us, everyone will still be here,” Louis said. “Everyone is with you, commander.”

These idiots! What’s going through their heads?! How can they accept the proposal so easily without hearing the details? Don’t they worry that they could be pawns in some greater scheme? I need them to think about this before deciding!

I tried to reason with them, but Thomas laughed and raised his hand, so I allowed him to speak.

“You can call us idiots, but when I was in trouble, someone came to save me. The two of us were alone, but he carried me for 20 kilometers on his back straight through enemy territory. Which idiot was that?”

That was me. But I hardly could have abandoned you! We were both on the verge of death, but I’m glad I could save you.

I tried to argue, but then Cote raised his hand.

“When I was imprisoned under suspicion of killing hostages, I remember a certain idiot forcing his way into the international court with his gun pointed at the true killer’s head.”

That had been me, too. Cote’s face was covered in wounds, making him look like a psychotic killer, but he had a kind heart.

Even in this base, he was secretly taking care of a stray cat. It'd been a shock when I saw a man over two meters tall with a bottle in his hand, feeding milk to a kitten.

“Commander, are you listening to your own words?” Clare said. “You remember the name of every last one of us. You must be the only commanding officer who remembers the full names of 1,200 people, along with their nine-digit identification numbers.”

I felt my face turning red. *That's because we're fighting as a family. How could I not remember your names?!*

The conference room filled with laughter when I tried to explain this.

Why is everyone laughing at me?! I scowled at Clare, and she smiled an uncharacteristically pure smile.

“We're a family, like you said. That's why we're going with you. So please tell us about the proposal and when we'll be leaving the United Nations. We'll have to start living out of this base.”

I should have known... There was never anything to worry about. My faith in my subordinates still seemed to have been lacking. The shame I felt was enough to turn my face red again. I tried to keep it together as I explained the proposal I'd received from Miki.

The expressions on my subordinates' faces turned to looks of surprise when they heard me explain the proposal. They urged me to explain in more detail.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Waaaaah! Shin, Arakawa’s bullying me!” Aikawa wailed.

“Kouki, I think the way you said that was a little mean,” Shingo agreed.

“Kouki, you’re the worst...” Alice added.

“Of course I’m jealous!” Aikawa had screamed when I told her about the relic. I told her about it in slightly mean-spirited way, and now everyone had turned against me.

I didn’t think she’d start crying like that. Now I don’t know what to say.

Shin was looking at me coldly, and Alice looked at me like I was piece of trash. I was ready to repent.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry! Look, I’ll show you a video of the inside of the relic, so please forgive me!”

I started playing my own video record, which I hadn’t deleted yet, on my terminal screen. I was surprised at how quickly Aikawa’s mood improved. I explained the video to them as they watched.

“This is the entrance I figured out how to open. It was a fairly simple puzzle made of pictures. There were more pictures inside that they used to express more instructions.” I kept on explaining as the video showed me solving the entrance puzzle.

Aikawa seem fascinated by the footage of me solving the puzzle, and, to my alarm, she began taking notes while watching.

“Sorry, Aikawa, it’s explained later in the video, but we need to

pretend that these ruins never existed,” I said. “Humankind just isn’t ready. Please just enjoy the video.”

Aikawa agreed and tore up her notes. I could only show them the video in the first place because Mom had given me permission. I’d have to delete it afterward.

“Nice to meet you, Earthlings,” the woman in the recording said.

“Buh hee?! Is that a human?” Shingo was understandably shocked. I had the same thought when I’d seen her.

When I explained that she was an artificial life form rather than a human, Shin, being an engineering specialist, was eager to hear what she was like. I told him she was like a human in every way, and he was disappointed we hadn’t kept any detailed information about her.

If we could ever make an AI like Eve, that would be a turning point in human history. She had a near-perfect human form. Chabane seemed near-perfect, but Eve was on another level.

“While returning home to Adam from Earth, the outer space exploration fleet...”

“Judging from her explanation, it sounds like many generations lived inside each ship. How did they deal with genetic abnormalities and diseases?” Alice asked.

I had no idea. Mom brought back various items that looked like documents, so I suggested we ask her later. Alice seemed disappointed and stopped asking questions. If my mom was looking into it, she’d probably figured it all out already.

“Their own species, the people of Adam, who were low in number and whose culture was in continual decline...”

Everyone was silent as we reached the difficult scene. Aikawa had already begun to cry.

We couldn't reveal the people of Adam publicly yet, but at least they were in our hearts. The time would someday come when we could tell the world. When that happened, I wanted to build a monument on the moon's surface.

"It's not like I'm gonna be using it," the woman in the recording said.

"Just to be clear, Kouki, Eve was one of the people of Adam, right?" Aikawa asked. "She was the last living member of a race that protected humanity."

"Yeah. You can't really tell from this video, but I'm sure she was one of the people of Adam."

Aikawa seemed confused when Eve's authority was revoked and she became a completely different person. I had the same reaction. It was horrific... The proof was in the fact that the camera became focused on the corner of the room and stopped moving. That was when I'd been staring at the ceiling instead of facing reality.

The video remained like that without moving for a while, but eventually my mom appeared in the frame with various items held in her hands. We were about to reach the scene where Eve headed home.

Oh, crap... I can't let them see this part! I dived for the pause button, but it was too late.

"That's to thank you for relieving me of my duty. Bye bye!"

The moment the kiss was shown, we heard a crunching sound as Alice squeezed the stainless steel bottle she was holding. I was

too afraid to look in her direction. Alice had been holding a bottle designed for use in space; it couldn't be dented without applying over 100 kilograms of pressure.

I heard Shingo and Aikawa shriek.

Just how much did she dent it? I slowly turned to look at Alice's hand.

"It's completely crushed?!"

I hadn't meant to say it aloud. The bottle in Alice's hand had been squished like a piece of clay. *I've really messed up... It's all over. This must be how I die.*

When I went to rescue Alice, I flew through a sky riddled with bullets, but the current situation seemed even more hopeless.

"A-Alice... the thing is..."

I watched as the damaged bottle crashed to the floor and rolled toward me. I couldn't help imagining that the bottle was my own neck. I desperately tried to come up with an excuse. I tried all kinds of awkward excuses, like, "It was an accident"; "She's not actually human"; and "I didn't even enjoy it." But Alice remained motionless, hanging her head.

Once I was done making excuses, she looked straight at me and asked, "Are you sure you want those to be your final words?"

Wait a minute! I looked to Shingo for help, but he looked away. Aikawa was pretending to sleep. *There's got to be some way out of this...*

Just as I was preparing to make one final prayer, there was a knock at the door.

My savior is here! I darted over and opened the door. There stood my mom with a serious look on her face.

**



Mom was standing outside the door with a serious look on her face, and I was desperately trying to figure out why.

Did I do something to make her mad? I don't think I did anything recently...

“It looks like you're all gathered already,” Mom said. “I have something important to say. Is now a good time?”

We all exchanged glances as my mom entered the room. Mom took a seat before picking up the bottle that Alice had crushed. “What happened to this?” she asked.

Everyone was silent, not knowing what to say.

Mom cleared her throat and began speaking. “First of all, I wonder if you're all aware of how much you've been through.”

What does she mean? Been through? We haven't done anything major.

Everyone else looked as doubtful as I was.

“It looks like being around Kouki has desensitized you all.”

What's that supposed to mean?! Are you trying to say that I'm the one who causes all the trouble?! I might have performed a few experiments with Shingo, but we only ever rehash a few of my mom's ideas or make things by accident. It hardly seems worth having this tense discussion over that.

“None of you seem to realize, so I'll explain. Alice, you discovered a treatment for the worst virus in the history of the human race. Shingo, you created an advanced AI and a new model of powered suit. Aikawa, they may just be published reports, but you've brought new ideas to space exploration. This very station

is based on ideas you've published. And I don't think I've told any of you this, but the 'Mother's Equation' that I published was an equation that Kouki derived by himself when he was three years old."

"Eeeeeeeeh?!" Everyone cried out in surprise at the same time.

Wait a minute! Those were just some sketches that happened to form that equation. I didn't actually think of it.

I frantically tried to explain, but everyone just looked at me kindly as if to say, "You don't have to hide it anymore."

Stop looking at me like that! It really was a misunderstanding. How many times do I have to explain this?

Mom completely ignored my distress and continued speaking. "There's more. Eighty percent of the research I've published was originally Kouki's work. I've taken the credit for myself to prevent Kouki from becoming unnecessarily famous. It's worth mentioning that leaders of nations around the world fear Kouki and refer to him as the 'demon child.' I can't blame them. The development of military technology over the past ten years has been almost entirely Kouki's work."

"Kouki, you're amazing..." said Alice.

"So Arakawa really was a genius after all," added Aikawa.

They were looking at me with sparkling eyes, but it was all one big misunderstanding.

All I did was give you advice! Stop exaggerating by saying I invented everything myself!

Ever since I'd been reincarnated, I was finding that nobody in

this world would listen whenever I had something important to say.

Is this some sort of curse?

“Right now, you’re a member of the academy, which is a neutral international organization. But do you know what’ll happen when you graduate? There’s sure to be competition over Kouki. It’s well-established that Kouki will boost technological development in whichever country he decides to live. That could lead to a terrible war. The same goes for the rest of you.”

What does she mean? What does this have to do with my friends?

“Your deeds have been great enough to change the world while you’re still students. Once you graduate, you’re likely to be placed under house arrest by your home countries, under the guise of protection.”

“Mom, I think you’re exaggerating,” I said.

Without any change in her expression, Mom said, “You’re naïve. If calling it protection doesn’t work, they’ll arrest you for some made-up crime. There have already been attempts to do this with Kouki. His father and I have to deal with it every time. Sadly, that’s just how international relations—how politics are.”

Then what should we do? I thought frantically. *We’re just ordinary people. The scale of this discussion is completely beyond all of us. Are we supposed to just accept it? I don’t think I can stand it! Everyone else feels the same, right?*

When I expressed my concerns, a wicked-looking smile appeared on Mom’s face. It was the same smile she made whenever she was about to punish Macho Man.

“Don’t underestimate your mother, Kouki. I could crush one or two of the world’s major powers if it came to it. What I wouldn’t be able to deal with would be the whole world deciding that you and your friends are enemies of humankind. We’re talking on this scale because that’s the problem I have to deal with. That’s where Project Ark comes in.”

This is getting out of hand. I guess I should just leave it all to her...

I urged Mom to continue her explanation as I rubbed my aching stomach.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

Project Ark—it had originally been an escape plan conceived to protect only my family. The original idea had been to escape to an uninhabited island or a space station if trouble arose. But the plan had grown in scale with the development of new technology and an increase in available funds. Successful observation of the Arakawa particle meant that the plan could be executed sooner than expected.

The Alternate Dimension Migration Project formed the foundation for Project Ark. To prepare for emergencies, I'd found another world where humans could live, and prepared an environment where my family and approximately 20,000 people who wished to accompany us could migrate to.

The Hakone base we were constructing was merely a front for that project. Once completed, the base would act as a fortress to protect the gate to the other world. As a secondary objective, I also wanted to find somewhere for Kon to live.

I expected it to be difficult to find a world with life forms similar to humans and a culture that wasn't particularly advanced, but the interdimensional scope that I brought back from the moon had proved useful. Using the scope made it possible to find other worlds. Eve gave me an instruction manual in English, so I had soon been able to use it.

Everyone appeared to be in shock when I explained all of this to them. I realized that it sounded like a fairy tale, but this was necessary for their safety.

Shingo was the first to recover and ask a question. "If we go to another world, won't we be attacked by the creatures living there?"

“We might be able to reason with them if they’re intelligent,” I said. “I’d prefer to resolve things as peacefully as possible. We aren’t invaders, so as a last resort, we could set ourselves up on an island or peninsula with heavy defensive walls around it. But if they persisted in attacking us even after we settle in some uninhabited region, we’d use force to eliminate our attackers.”

Shingo seemed to accept the answer, and he became quiet.

Aikawa was next to raise her hand. “What will we do about things we’ll need for everyday life?”

“I’ve already collected enough resources for us to live for five years, and I intend to continue collecting more. In the longer term, I intend to take large-scale facilities such as production plants with us.”

Aikawa accepted the response with a nod.

The next question came from Alice. “Will we be able to return to this world?”

“Of course. If it turns out I was worrying over nothing and you’re able to live an ordinary life after your graduation, just think of it as a slightly unconventional holiday villa.”

“I’m okay with that,” Alice said.

Everyone else remained silent.

For some reason, Kouki didn’t seem to have a single word to say. It was only when I pressed him to ask any questions he might have that he raised his head and looked at me with a serious expression.

“What are you planning to do about soldiers and weapons? And will there need to be some form of political negotiation with

the other world?”

I'd expect no less from Kouki... He's already beginning to grasp the main issues we'll deal with when living there. I felt I'd been right to suggest to Shuuichi that we make Kouki our representative in the other world.

“We have 12,000 professional soldiers, and the rest are researchers and engineers. Since more than half are soldiers, we'll be able to deal with whatever threats we encounter. As for the weapons we're taking, half of the people will be equipped with combat-use powered suits, and we'll also have several dozen industrial suits. There will be 130 aircraft, and 200 tanks and armored vehicles. In addition, we'll take whatever vehicles our engineers might need. I've left the specifics of the weaponry to our military division, but we will have an equivalent level of weapons. Political negotiations will be handled by our intelligence department and PR department, so there is no cause for concern because they're professionals.”

“Well, that sounds okay,” Kouki replied before appearing to become deep in thought.

I looked at each of the children in turn, and then in a gentle voice I said, “By the time an emergency arises, it'll be too late to prepare. That's why I want to start preparing our countermeasures now. Just think of it as us building a secret base.”

I used the gentlest voice I could to avoid causing them any concern, and it seemed to be effective. Everyone was smiling back at me.

I vowed to myself once again that I would protect these children's smiles.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Another world...” I whispered to myself as I lay staring at the ceiling in my room.

When I'd previously been thrown into another world by accident, I found good people there. But I didn't know what would happen in this next world.

There was a lot I was uncertain about, but I understood this was the only way to ensure the safety of Alice and my friends.

I was afraid at first, but having heard how many soldiers were coming with us, it seemed we'd have a reasonable size force accompanying us. That would probably assure our safety.

I was lost in thought until an email appeared on my terminal.

“Contrary to our agreed-upon schedule, we'll be returning to Earth tomorrow. If you'd like, you may return home briefly when we get back. I'd then like to make a visit to everyone's home at a convenient time. I'll be explaining our plans to your families. Everyone will be gathering at the Hakone base in the coming days, so please make preparations.”

Mom sent the same email to me and my friends. She appeared to be serious about setting up a base in another world. Things really were getting out of hand.

The bad feeling I had about this summer vacation had been right on; but before long, I was sleeping soundly.

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On June 27, 2102, the leaders of the United Nations were in disarray.

Shuuichi Arakawa, the commanding officer of a unit known as the Arakawa unit that had completed many difficult missions, suddenly asked permission to resign. His unit of 351 personnel simultaneously made similar requests, leading the United Nations to fear that a coup d'état was about to take place. However, everything had been done according to official procedures, so the United Nations reluctantly accepted.

The following day, Miki Arakawa resigned from her position at every research institution. She then established a large conglomerate of companies known as Noa.

The personnel of the Arakawa unit who resigned had then registered as part of a private military division that was one of Noa's defense contractor divisions. From that point on, they served as soldiers working for Noa.

More than half of the personnel assigned to the Next Generation Research Laboratory and the Space Particle Research Institution of Japan had also transferred to Noa. This then led to the transfer of many scientists and engineers thought to be loyal to the Arakawa family. The world's nations became alarmed and tried to prevent what was happening, but the personnel were already under the protection of Noa.

Then came information that would be a final blow to the nations of the world: Kouki Arakawa, Shingo Saito, Alice Alford, and Megumi Aikawa each stated in an international press conference that they were joining Noa of their own free will.

This action thwarted attempts by nation states to intervene, leaving each nation able to do no more than simply watch the events play out.

That was the day that the world began to change rapidly.

Chapter 2: Project Ark

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

I made my way toward Miki's room in the under-construction Hakone base. I descended in a large elevator from level 1, which was just about completed, and passed through level 2, where storage rooms and the weapons storage region were located. The elevator continued on to level 3, which was accessible only to a limited number of personnel. Finally, the elevator stopped at level 4, where I'd find Miki.

A soldier greeted me as I stepped out of the elevator. "Thanks for your hard work, Commander."

Levels 4 and below were guarded by my own people. They were no longer wearing the United Nations uniforms that they'd grown so used to; their uniforms were those of the private military department, supplied to them by Noa. On the chest of each uniform, there was an eye-catching emblem with the letters "T.M.N." and the name of the soldier's unit embroidered over a pair of wings.

Though my subordinates had been pleased by how cool the uniforms looked, I was reluctant to tell them that T.M.N. stood for "Team Muscle of Noa," which was the real name that Miki had chosen for our unit.

To avoid a protest, I told them that T.M.N. stood for "Team Mercenary of Noa." Clare had been the one who'd come up with this alternative interpretation. Mercenaries of Noa seemed a fitting way to describe us.

“Miki, I’m coming in!” I called.

I entered without waiting for a response, and there I found Miki looking troubled as she operated a large-scale terminal. At times like this, she wouldn’t listen to anyone other than Kouki, so I waited patiently.

At last, she registered my presence. “Oh, I didn’t notice you there.”

“I’ve been here for about half an hour. There’s something I want to ask you about,” I said, extinguishing my cigarette. “Shortly before I left the United Nations, the nuclear submarine *Tolstoy* went missing en route to the Antarctic. The top brass sent out a search party, but they found nothing and concluded that the submarine must have sunk in some unfortunate accident. When I was in Africa last, while visiting a port belonging to Noa, I saw a submarine that was identical, except it had a Noa emblem instead of the UN emblem. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh, that was the *Tolstoy*. It’s the submarine that cooperated when Kouki was saving Alice. They asked us to give them asylum after I started Noa.”

“Why’s a United Nations ship asking a private corporation for asylum?!” I exclaimed. “That was one of their cutting-edge models of submarine! Did we just take one of their best submarines? Wait, don’t tell me this is related to the recent accident in which a new model of plane mysteriously crashed!”

“Do you mean the aircraft that was carrying the paratrooper unit? They asked us for asylum. It caused us a lot of trouble! I had to quickly make a similar-looking unmanned craft and have it crash.”

“That can’t be right!” I objected. “They were elite soldiers. Unlike my nameless Ghost Unit, those soldiers were well-respected.

Why would they fake their own deaths to join with us?”

This was getting me worked up, but Miki remained calm and explained it all while gazing off into the distance.

“It’s all because of Kouki. The crew of the *Tolstoy* and the members of the paratrooper unit were saved by Kouki during Alice’s rescue. One of the destroyers from the United Nations Space Forces also asked for asylum so they could protect Shingo. It’s their way of thanking Chabane.”

“And you believe everything these people have told you?”

“There’s no need to worry,” Miki said. “Eve gave me a device that reads their surface level thoughts. I didn’t want to use it, but I did to make sure there was nothing for us worry about.”

Then I guess it’s okay, I thought. Kouki really is incredible. He just has to spend a little time with people, and they want to be on his side. I guess this is what they call charisma?

Neither Miki nor I could be considered ordinary people. But somehow we’d raised Kouki to be a respectable and level-headed young man. It made me even less forgiving toward those who wished to disrupt our peace.

“I almost forgot why I called you here, Shuuichi,” Miki said. “If we count those who’ve asked for our protection in addition to those who were already with us, there are now more than 100,000 of us. Everyone is currently housed in the Hakone base or one of our other bases, but we’ll be at our limit before long.”

She’s right, I noted. We might not have to worry about food, but living space is limited.

“That’s why I’d like you to scout out a particular world that my research department discovered by searching for 24 hours a day

using the interdimensional scope. I'll leave it up to your military department to decide on the equipment and rules of engagement. Please use minimal force."

"Understood," I nodded. "I suppose I should ask the research department about the details?"

"Exactly."

I felt enthusiastic about having a mission for the first time in a long while. Just as I was about to leave Miki's room, I stopped. It was great that we had people seeking asylum or asking to cooperate from so many places, but I was worried about how we were managing our intelligence. I wasn't too concerned about our efforts to migrate to another world leaking out. Anyone making such claims would immediately lose credibility in the eyes of any government. But if a government institution ever identified the world we were migrating to, it would all be for naught.

Miki gave me some reassurance. "You don't have to worry about that. I haven't talked about migrating to another world to anyone who isn't officially part of Noa. I've told everyone that the reason we're buying equipment and developing technology is for use by our private military department. I do know what I'm doing. I've left the essential information management to Clare in the PR department. She's incredibly talented when it comes to managing information. We've only given out information we wanted to give out. We haven't revealed any information unnecessarily. I'm glad she's on our side."

I never thought of Clare as anything more than a highly competent secretary, but it seemed she was more amazing than I'd given her credit for. For Miki to praise her like that, Clare had to be quite talented.

I took Louis's Squad B with me to the engineering department in preparation for our reconnaissance mission in the other world.

We were greeted by a man. "Welcome. You must all be from the military department. I'm the lead researcher, Ozaki. First of all, I'd like to talk to you about the world we've discovered. Please look at this."

The researcher named Ozaki showed several photographs and a graph of some numerical values on a large screen. He explained them to us while pointing out specific parts with a pointer.

"This photograph was taken by one of our spy planes. As you can see, it found plants resembling those on Earth. The data we collected also suggests that the composition of the air is roughly equivalent to that of Earth. We therefore believe this world is habitable, but we're unable to make a conclusive decision without more detailed data. It should be us researchers who go out there, but we don't know what danger might be waiting for us. That's why we'd like to have professional soldiers survey the area."

I interrupted to ask a question. "Not that I mind going, but couldn't you survey the entire area with spy planes first?"

"Indeed. We have considered using spy planes, but in this new world, which we're calling G-88, time doesn't pass in the same way as on Earth. For every hour that passes in this world, approximately one day passes in G-88. Using unmanned drones means we can't easily adjust our approach once they're deployed."

I see. If we spent an hour making preparations to recover a spy plane, a whole day would pass. That could be enough time for the existing residents of G-88 to discover evidence that we've been there. We can't take that risk.

The difference in how time passed did have one advantage. If we sent equipment into the new world, the people on the other

end could have things up and running while we were still preparing our new equipment here. In that regard, it was a big advantage.

“I’d like to ask that you accept a mission of reconnaissance spanning several days,” the researcher said. “I’d also like you to launch a reconnaissance satellite. Only half a day will pass here, but we’ll assist in any way we can. We’ve already arranged an emergence point for everyone on an uninhabited island with nothing nearby, so you’ll be able to take plenty of resources with you.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll discuss this with my people before deciding what resources we’ll take.”

“Please contact me on an internal line when you’ve made arrangements,” Ozaki said, then bowed and left.

If this had been the United Nations, the resources would have been managed by idiot researchers who looked down upon us as warmongers. By contrast, Ozaki left it all to us. I was keen to reward his faith in us by making the mission a success.

“All right, listen up!” I told my subordinates. “It’s time to show these clever researchers what we can do. Other than food, what do you think we should take? Let me hear your thoughts.”

My subordinates were politely sitting until I was done speaking. They soon became less orderly and got into more relaxed positions to exchange their ideas.

“It’s obvious that we need weapons and ammunition,” one of them said. “I think we should take some medicines, too.”

“It’s another world. We’d better take the big guns because we don’t know what’ll be out there.”

“They said it’s an uninhabited island. Is it too soon to build ourselves an outpost?”

I sat and listened to my subordinates as the discussion continued to jump from one idea to another. They weren’t the sort of soldiers to care about rank in this situation. They were simply exchanging ideas. Doing that with no consideration of rank increased the solidarity of the unit and gave us a shared understanding. That was the kind of thing that increased our chances of survival.

I let them continue until Louis was done collecting everyone’s ideas.

“I’ve summarized everyone’s ideas in writing,” Louis told me. “It’s handwritten, but please check the contents.”

I looked over the papers that Louis handed me.

“Enough powered suits for everyone.” That sounded sensible. Powered suits were the most effective form of personal armor on Earth, so we’d need plenty of them.

“Lots of weapons, ammunition, and medicines.” *What do they mean by “lots”?! That was Cote’s suggestion. He was quite sketchy at times, but that was just how he was. I’d have to come up with precise numbers myself.*

“As many tanks and aircraft as we’re permitted to use. Missile launching installations and anti-aircraft guns.” *I’ll have to talk to Ozaki about that.*

“Resources for establishing a simple base.” *We’ll need this for our defense and future operations. It’ll be worth the trouble.* “Large-scale weapons for erasing our traces.” *If the conditions aren’t right, we certainly will need to erase our traces when we withdraw. But this method might be a little crude. I’ll have to*

talk that over with Ozaki, too.

“Your son.” *Come on now!! Are you saying my son’s a resource?!*

“Louis!” I barked. “I don’t care if you’re joking—stop treating my son like a resource. I’d laugh about it, but do you know how mad Miki would get?”

“I may not have expressed myself very well, but it’s not a joke,” Louis said. “I genuinely think we’ll need your son.”

“What? Why would he be necessary?” I demanded. “I’d rather avoid taking Kouki to dangerous places.”

“I heard that your son understood the language of an unknown race who built the relic on the moon,” Louis said. “Someone with that level of intelligence is sure to become useful in another world. Do you think you could ask him to come along?”

“If he’s willing,” I said reluctantly. “Though we’ll have to make Kouki’s safety our number one priority before I can allow this.”

“If it comes to it, we’ll act as his shield,” Louis assured me.

That was enough for me. I stopped worrying about my son’s safety. *Now Kouki himself just has to agree...*

I forgot about that for the time being and called for Ozaki so I could get permission to take these resources.

Ozaki soon re-entered the room. He looked over the handwritten notes and simply said, “Understood. I’ll prepare everything.”

It wasn’t just me, we were all surprised.

“Is something wrong?” Ozaki asked.

“Why’d you give approval so easily?” I demanded.

“You’re all soldiers assigned to Noa now, but you were official soldiers of the United Nations until recently,” Ozaki said with a smile. “I’m sure you’re not the kind of people who’d recklessly start a war or wipe out the native life forms. I’m sure everything written here is a genuine necessity.”

We didn’t know what to say. It was true that we were fighting for the sake of peace. But even so, we’d been branded killers on many occasions. And yet, Ozaki had unconditional faith in us, and he’d promised to give us whatever resources we needed. He seemed to hold us in high regard.

We held back our grins as we all saluted Ozaki.

“Noa infantry unit ‘T.M.N.’ promises to use our full strength to accomplish this mission!”

I haven’t given salute with so much passion behind it since I first joined the United Nations, I thought as I headed to Kouki’s room to ask him to come with us.

**

“Kouki, can I come in?” I called.

“Yeah, sure.”

Kouki was watching an animal documentary by himself when I entered the room.

Why isn’t he with his friends and his girlfriend today? It seemed strange that his usual friends weren’t around, so I asked him why.

“Alice and the rest are visiting their homes with security

teams,” Kouki said. “They’re preparing for the move before they start living in the base. I think Kon is with the academy principal. He seems to have taken a liking to the principal’s office lately.”

So they’re preparing to move. If they won’t be back for two or three days, then now is the perfect time. I sat down beside Kouki and wondered how I was going to ask him to come with us to the other world.

Kouki looked away from the TV and asked me, “It’s unusual for you to come see me, Dad. Do you need something?”

“Y-Yeah.” For a moment I was taken off guard by his intuition. “I’m going to scout the other world together with my unit. I’d like you to come with us. We’ll keep you safe, of course.”

After some thought, he asked, “Will there be any strange creatures?”

It made me remember that he’d always had a liking for wild animals. Although I hadn’t been able to go because of work, Miki had taken him to the zoo when he was very young because he was always happy to see animals on TV. He’d always been a quiet child, so I was surprised to hear how excited he’d gotten at the zoo. He hadn’t wanted to move away from the Japanese wolf enclosure.

Afterward, Miki bought him a Japanese wolf toy, one that could have passed for a taxidermized wolf. I remembered her telling me about how he’d smile as he held it as if it was something he treasured.

“Well, it’s another world, so I guess so,” I told him.

“Then I’ll go.”

I sent the message to Louis saying I’d gotten Kouki’s agree-

ment. Then I told Kouki we needed to go to the weapons storage region to prepare.

He stood up and smiled wryly. “Dad, you should try to plan things out a little more. What if I had something important to do today?”

Sorry, Son... Your mother is always saying the same thing.

I gave the same response as always: “I’ll try harder in the future.”

I grabbed Kouki by the arm and dragged him off to the weapons storage region.

**

We arrived at the weapons storage region. The team who’d be going to the other world with us was waiting in front of the entrance.

I was worried that Kouki might be scared off by this collection of mean-looking faces, but he didn’t seem bothered at all.

He even smiled at Cote, who had the meanest-looking face of all, and said, “You’re the one with the cat.” And then he talked happily with Cote as though he’d somehow known about Cote taking care of the stray cat.

“Listen up!” I called. “It’s time to choose your weapons and powered suits! Remember that Kouki is the only one who can wear the eighth-generation model, so don’t choose that one.”

“Wow, Dad... you really are a commander in the special forces. Mom had told me, but I still thought you were just some muscle man.”

My son's words made me smile. "Kouki, do you know how amazing commanders are? You should have more respect for me."

Elise soon interrupted our happy moment. Clare wasn't available, so Elise would be head of intelligence for the reconnaissance team. I was about to introduce her by saying, "She's the twin older sister of that girl Clare, who you like," but Kouki said something that surprised me.

"Are you Clare's older sister?"

"Wow! Kouki, you can tell Clare and Elise apart?" I asked.

I could barely tell them apart despite always being in the same unit with them, yet Kouki had distinguished them in an instant. Kouki responded with an incredibly accurate way of describing the two of them.

"Yes. Clare's beauty is in her style and grace. Elise's beauty is in her soothing cuteness."

"Commander!" Elise cried. "Kouki can stay in my room in the other world!"

I can't authorize that. She clearly has something immoral in mind. But Kouki really made that easy to understand. When I look at Elise, I really can see how her beauty is in her cuteness. How strange.

My subordinates were also impressed, and saying things like, "Amazing! He can tell them apart."

We need to get on with choosing our weapons and preparing for our trip to the other world...

"Everyone! The gate is about to open. Don't run; take your

time while choosing your weapons. Be civilized about it.”

If I didn’t warn them beforehand, there was no doubt they’d run around like children in a toy store. I wanted to nip that in the bud.

I checked they were lined up properly before opening the gate. But the moment I opened it, they all charged in like idiots.

“Awesome! These suits are advance production model sixth-generation suits!”

“Hey, I saw that flamethrower before you did! Keep your hands off!”

“Where are the 80-millimeter anti-materiel rifles? That’s what I want.”

I sighed and knitted my brow. There was no getting through to them now. Feeling defeated, I told Kouki to go choose his weapons.

Kouki tilted his head and told me, “I don’t have any training, and I’ve never even fired a weapon.”

“That’s fine,” I told him. “They’ve added a firing control system to your suit’s control module, so you just need to line the weapon up with the displayed reticle and fire. Though, I’m not letting you take any handheld weapons.”

Kouki ran off with incredible energy to join my subordinates.

I should have known he’d also be the type to get excited about choosing a weapon.

For myself, I chose a 20-millimeter rifle, a grenade launcher, and a shield for defense. I decided I’d take some reliable small

weapons since my subordinates were loading up on the big flashy ones. While I was studying the weapons and thinking about how I'd use them, Kouki returned.

“Dad,” Kouki said, “I want this one and that one.”

“Hmm? Which ones? Do you even know what that— Actually, I'm sure you know all about it.”

Kouki was grinning and pointing toward the prototype 180-millimeter rail gun and the gunpowder pile bunker. The rail gun could only be fired while the suit was in a kneeling position, but it was a monstrous weapon that fired 180-millimeter shells at a speed of 6.9 km/s. A weapon like that would obliterate almost any target it was fired at.

The pile bunker was a short-range weapon with incredible power. I never used one, but it was easily capable of penetrating a three-meter-thick plate of metal. *If we mount these things onto Kouki's eighth-generation suit... I shouldn't think about it. It's not a healthy thought.*

“Just promise me you'll warn us before you fire, and you shouldn't use them carelessly,” I told him.

“I know that.”

I wasn't sure he understood, but I wasn't going to argue with Kouki about his choices. It looked as though everyone else also made their choices and installed their weapons to their own suits.

All that remained was to prepare the vehicles we needed, and then we'd head to the gate installed on the lowest level: level 5.

I asked Elise to reserve the large elevator that we used to move our equipment.

Once we finished our preparations, everyone lined up before the gate.

Behind me was an expanse of pitch-black space. Anyone who passed through it would be taken to the other world. Unsurprisingly, my subordinates were somewhat fearful at the sight of this mysterious object they were seeing for the first time. I urged Elise to say a few words to increase morale.

Elise considered this a sort of ritual as she began a heartfelt speech to inspire courage. “Gentlemen, we’re about to head out to an unknown world. I can’t tell you what kind of difficulties and enemies await us there. However! We’ve been through countless difficult missions to get here, and nothing is impossible for us! Have faith in the soldiers fighting by your side, and have faith in the allies who are supporting us. If you can do that, you’ll certainly return alive. We don’t abandon our family! We don’t betray our family! Got that? I want everyone to come back. Reconnaissance team, move out!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I watched the courage return to the faces of these brave men. And then I was the first to step through the gate.

August 1, 2102, 10:30 AM. The 93-person reconnaissance team of Noa’s mercenary unit, T.M.N., were deployed to a world the people of Earth knew as G-88.

They carried with them 93 powered suits, three tanks, four aircraft, three anti-aircraft guns, 30 cruise missiles, two gravitational collapse bombs, materials for constructing an outpost, and 12 special-purpose vehicles.

I felt a sensation that I couldn't put into words as I stepped through the black gate. It might have been best described as a feeling of passing through a thick syrup. In the same moment, a grass plain leapt into view before my eyes.

It was just as Ozaki had described: an isolated island surrounded by steep cliffs, in the middle the sea.

“Looks as though some birdlike creatures are living here,” I commented.

Through my suit's camera, I saw large birds resting their wings here and there on the grass plain. I checked that the oxygen levels were high enough and that there were no toxins in the atmosphere before opening the door to my suit cockpit and breathing in the outside air.

“Feels good... The air's so clear.”

I took a cigarette from my pocket and lit it. I exhaled a cloud of smoke as I waited for my subordinates to arrive. The space behind me became warped, and a clouded figure slowly came into view. It must have been the effect of there being a time lag compared to Earth. I watched the space distort and wobble as a powered suit began to emerge. It wasn't a pleasant sight.

If someone following right behind me was taking this long to appear, that meant we'd be waiting until tomorrow before Kouki was transferred to this world. I'd smoked three cigarettes by the time just their upper body finished transferring. Clearly, expanding a company interdimensionally had its own unique problems.

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“It's been three hours since we began entering the gate. A total of 20 personnel have transferred...” said Louis absentmindedly. He'd followed right behind me, and now he sat on the grass plain

with his suit removed.

If it hadn't been for Kouki's advice—"If this is going to take time, you'd better have some resources sent through soon after the first group of people"—we'd have wasted an entire day.

A truck, with several powered suits clinging onto the top of it, began making the transfer.

"Louis, what's in that truck?" I asked.

"I believe those are the materials for setting up a base."

That means we can get started on building the outpost.

My subordinates became scattered across the plain chasing the birds like idiots while shouting, "Let's try roasting one!" I ordered them to gather and get ready to begin construction work.

Some of the men had explored the surroundings of the island while chasing the birds around, and they reported that the island was a roughly-40-kilometer-long ellipse. It was nothing but grassy plains with a wooded area full of short trees on the southern side.

What to do now...?

"Louis, build the outpost in the center of the island," I ordered. "Let's make it a 600-meter-long square. Surround it with reinforced defense walls and set up an anti-aircraft installation in the center. Put the gate on the northern side."

"What should we do about lookouts?"

"Deploy teams of two facing north, south, east, and west. Make sure they're equipped with sniper rifles and floodlights. And make sure no one fires without getting permission first. Instruct

them to withdraw if they spot anything.”

I helped Louis unload materials from the truck once it had finally completed the transfer. Once construction was completed, we’d have to launch the satellite and construct some spy planes. We’d also have to think about deploying the tanks.

While unloading the truck and thinking about the work awaiting us, I realized that there were a lot more people here than there had been just a moment ago. I couldn’t understand why, so I asked Louis.

“Your son gave out an instruction while we were on the other side of the gate: ‘If we all go separately, it’ll waste time. Grab onto the truck, and head through the gate with it.’”

I see. That’s helped us secure the area here, so it was a good call. I should have instructed that from the start... I’ll have to thank Kouki.

Cote had already assembled the observation satellite. He told me he was making preparations for the launch.

Things were going too smoothly. Experience told me that we were bound to hit major problems at a time like this. As expected, I soon received an urgent message from one of the lookout teams.

“This is the eastern lookout team. A large, flying creature is approaching from a bearing of 0-9-3. Altitude is 80 meters. Distance is 2,500 meters. Low speed.”

“Does the creature appear to be intelligent?”

“That’s unconfirmed. However, I wouldn’t expect a creature looking like some kind of undead monster bird to have any intelligence.”

Louis demanded confirmation from the lookout team: “Does it have intelligence?”

“Probably not,” they responded.

Now what? I asked if the creature noticed them.

“It appears to have noticed us.”

If it noticed them, it was already too late to avoid contact.

First, we should try using our floodlights to send a signal, and see how it reacts. Though, that leaves some risk of it coming into contact with us... Perhaps we should also fire a warning shot once it approaches to within 900 meters.

I asked for Louis for his opinion before making a decision. I got his agreement before giving my orders.

“Signal to it with the floodlights. If it continues to approach, fire two warning shots into the sea below the target once it approaches to within a distance of 900 meters. If it still continues to approach... you have permission to fire on it once it’s within 300 meters.”

“Yes, sir.”

Having given my orders, I ended our communication to allow them to concentrate. Others who must have overheard the discussion gathered to see what was happening and were holding their breaths.

I can’t blame them. Our unit is about to enter into our first combat in another world.

I received another transmission: “Target has been shot down.”

“Understood. I’ll send someone to relieve you. Head back to base.”

Our first contact with life in another world reached an unfortunate conclusion. I headed to a newly constructed command post to hear a report of the combat from the returning lookout.

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“Was the 80-millimeter anti-materiel rifle you used effective?”

“It had more than enough power. I believe the target could have been shot down by infantry carrying a 20-millimeter caliber weapon.”

A video recorded by his suit showed a flying monster bird being taken down with a single shot and falling into the sea, just as he’d explained.

In terms of its basic form, the creature wouldn’t have looked out of place on Earth. But when Miki analyzed the video that Kouki recorded when he’d been transported to another world, she found that something called a magical barrier, which was like a bullet-proof wall, was in use in that world.

Could those barriers also exist in G-88?

“When the shell hit, did anything appear to resist it?” I asked.

“Resist the shell? I don’t know what you mean... Actually, I did feel there was a sort of lag right before it hit the target. As if the shell was penetrating something.”

It seems I was right to suspect that we might find barriers in this world, too. Miki said, “It might seem like magic, but it’s more likely a ball of energy, so hitting it with greater energy should be able to nullify the barrier.” The energy of the rifle shell

must have been enough to win out over the energy of the barrier protecting the monster bird.

I shared my conclusions with my subordinate. The question was whether or not the 5.56 millimeter caliber weapons that our soldiers normally carried would work.

It's not like we can shoot at this world's inhabitants for the sake of an experiment. We'll have to leave this problem until another day.

Louis entered the room and told me, "Commander, we've launched the reconnaissance satellite. We've also finished assembling the VSTOL craft we brought. It's ready for a test flight."

"All right. Begin collecting information once the reconnaissance planes have finished their test flights," I instructed him before lighting and smoking a cigarette.

I realized I'd started smoking a lot more recently, but it was hard to stop.

Construction of the base and the barracks is completed. I suppose we just need to wait until we've gathered some information. I can't think of anything else to do, and I'm not sure what our priorities should be right now.

Just as I was regretting not having Elise go through the gate sooner, there was a knock at the door and Elise entered.

"Elise Dauntless, reporting for duty."

"I've been waiting for you! We've done everything that needs doing for now. What do you think we should do next?"

Elise adjusted her glasses using a single finger. She looked terribly angry as she said, "Everything that needs doing? From what

I've seen up until entering this room, I get the impression that we've merely constructed the base. Do we have work schedules? Have rooms been allocated in the barracks? Have we arranged meal times and canteen hours? Have we setup recreation facilities... or even showers? I see you've collected a lot of cigarette butts in your ashtray. What have you been doing, exactly?"

I'd forgotten that the biggest difference between Elise and Clare was Elise's sharp tongue. Clare would have thought those things without saying them, but Elise was always frank and outspoken. And the listener simply had to listen and endure her disheartening remarks because she was always too right to be argued with.

"Sorry. I'll leave it up to you to manage the facilities."

"Yes, sir. Your talents will be more valued on the battlefield. Might I start by releasing the birds caught by Idiot Squad A and Idiot Squad B? I don't want to eat 'roast bird.'"

I gave her approval; I didn't want to eat that, either. Elise began rapidly giving out instructions to my subordinates using her terminal as she continued making complaints. When Elise was asked to manage facilities like this, she proved even more capable than Clare. But there was no avoiding the strict order she'd impose on everyone.

Although I was supposed to be the commanding officer here, instructions from Elise appeared on my terminal, too. I kept my objections to myself and got to work.

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While I was taking a short break to eat dinner during the meal time that Elise had quickly arranged, a message appeared on my terminal: "Please come to the command post, ASAP."

I headed there with my plate still in my hand.

“Commander, forgive our rudeness. We can wait 20 seconds, so please, finish your dinner.”

Elise was scowling and I didn’t want to anger her further, so I ate as quickly as I could. Those 20 seconds passed before I could finish, and Elise began to explain the situation without waiting any longer.

“The pilot of a reconnaissance plane returned with some information. Based on our data analysis and his oral account, we’ve identified no man-made structures or settlements within a 400-kilometer radius. The only man-made structure we’ve encountered is a building that appears to be a lighthouse, 500 kilometers to the south. We’ve concluded that some life form in this world has some seafaring ability. It’s not a problem for us if they have technology on that level.”

“So they’re not on the level of what we’d call ‘primitive man’?” I asked after finally finishing my meal.

Everyone nodded.

Now it was Cote’s turn. He brought in a portable screen.

“These are images from our reconnaissance satellite. At present, the satellite is more or less stationary above this base. From our analysis of the images, we’ve determined that this world is a planet floating through space, and the laws of physics are more than likely the same as those on Earth. At the very least, we can be certain that the ground beneath us isn’t being carried on the back of a giant turtle.”

I see. This isn’t some strange world where the seas flow off the edge of the world into some abyss like in myths. But the continents of this world are so different from Earth’s... It looked as

though there were about eight independent continents. *Which one are we on?* I wondered. Then I urged Cote to continue.

“We’re currently here, on an island at the upper left of the continent in the center,” he said. “For convenience, we’ve named it Noa Island. From our satellite images, we’ve identified a large city located 920 kilometers south of Noa Island. Given the size of the other cities in the area, this would appear to be a capital city.”

We were only around 1,000 kilometers away from the capital city, but they had no planes they could scramble to fly at us, so the level of their culture appeared quite low. I wanted more detailed information, so I asked Elise whether she had anything to add.

“Louis is currently analyzing the images,” she told me.

For now, I’d have to wait for Louis. The pilot was still in his flight suit, so I had him leave so he could eat while I waited for Louis. I waited for about an hour before he came running into the room.

“I’m sorry I’m late. I can show you images recently captured by the satellite. Please take a look.”

Everyone looked in surprise at the images Louis brought up on the screen.

“Is that... a horse-drawn carriage?”

“Yes. It’s being pulled by a creature similar to an armadillo, but it’s more or less a horse-drawn carriage. The light is from torches rather than electrical lighting, though some of it comes from luminescent spheres that are unlike anything we’re familiar with. I believe that this is the “magic” that Mrs. Arakawa was talking about. We’ve also learned from the analysis that this planet is roughly 4.5 times the size of Earth.”

So in summary... G-88 is a similar environment to our world, Earth. However, despite being 4.5 times the size of Earth, the gravity is somehow roughly equivalent. The life here is also different from that of Earth, and the culture is equivalent to our medieval period. We've also found that our weapons are effective against the native life forms, and the nearest man-made structure is 520 kilometers to the south.

I knitted my brow while I thought it over. *What kind of orders do I give out now?!*

Miki told me, "Please handle things gently," but this wasn't what I'd been imagining. I was expecting that any cultures we might encounter would be on the level of the 19th century. I thought that they would be the ones to reach out to us. "What do you think we should do now?" I asked my subordinates to get their opinions.

"Perhaps we should try making contact with the nation we've identified after your son arrives?" Elise suggested.

"I agree with Elise's idea. To be ready for the worst-case scenario, we can have aircraft equipped with gravity collapse bombs on standby overhead to offer direct support. If it came to that, it would be safest for your son to leave at high speed without us."

So we're counting on Kouki, after all. Kouki was expected to arrive the next morning. For now, we started working on detailed plans for how we might make contact with the nation we'd discovered.

The next morning, I waited for Kouki's arrival.

An hour on Earth really was equivalent to one day here. Those who'd arrived most recently were shocked when they saw the

base already completed. To them, it was as though I'd only stepped through the gate 50 minutes ago.

As I was thinking this over, the space began to distort before my eyes. I waited for the eighth-generation suit worn by Kouki to start making the slow transition through the gloopy space... but... *He's not slow at all!* He was appearing incredibly quickly. As I watched Kouki transition into this world with incredible speed, I realized that I needed to warn everyone.

“Stand back from the gate! Hurry, or you'll be hit by the shock wave! Kouki just went through the gate at the speed of sound!”

A few seconds after my warning, Kouki finished the transfer with a roaring shock wave before he took to the air at high speed.

I made a call to Kouki using my terminal so I could yell at him. “Are you stupid?! Why would you go through the gate at the speed of sound?! Someone could have been killed.”

“I'm sorry... I had instructions from Mom. She said I have to hand over this letter right away.”

That wasn't enough for me to forgive him for not checking if it was safe here. After Kouki landed, I knocked some sense into him with my clenched fist before reading the letter.

It said: “I expect you've already begun a full-scale survey. If the results of the survey suggest that negotiation is necessary, temporarily withdraw and contact me. Under no circumstances should you attempt to negotiate and form any agreements yourself.

“P.S. If you use armed force to suppress any newly discovered cultures, I'll divorce you.”

I'm not that brainless! And if we did get divorced, who would

get custody of Kouki? I looked up from the document and saw Kouki looking back at me.

“If you get divorced, I’m going to live with Mom!” he declared.

My subordinates were trying to suppress their laughter. Elise went so far as to tell Kouki, “That’s a smart decision,” before patting him on the head. The scene left me feeling a little disheartened as I told Kouki our plans.

“I’m planning to scout out the area where our satellite found a man-made structure. If possible, I’d like to make contact with a nation we’ve discovered. I’ll be taking 30 fully armed personnel with me. We’ll be moving in a circular formation with you at the center. If anything happens, you’re to retreat by yourself at high speed. That’s an order.”

The whole time I was talking, Kouki had been sneaking glances at the birds. I smiled wryly and told him, “Go do whatever you like until preparations are made.”

Kouki smiled and ran off. I put Cote in charge of his defense before heading to the barracks to make preparations for our outing.

Two hours later, my subordinates were lined up in front of a large VSTOL aircraft. I went over our plans one more time.

“We’re going to be heading to a continent 520 kilometers south of here. Our goal is to make contact with a nation located on the coast of the continent! If this proves impossible, we’ll withdraw after we’ve gathered as much information as we can. We’ll land on the continent by approaching the coast in a transport plane before descending from overhead. Once we’ve landed, we’ll hide ourselves using optical camouflage. Then our first goal will be to head toward their fort while traveling at our suits’ cruising speed. The information from our satellite suggests that the fort

also acts as a checkpoint, so we should be able to make contact with a government official there and begin negotiations.”

I gave my subordinates time to digest the information before giving further explanation.

“Next, let me explain our rules of engagement. No one is to open fire for any purpose other than self-defense. I also forbid the use of chemical weapons. We’ll be moving in a circular formation. Keep Kouki in the center and make his safety your top priority! I’ll leave everything else up to your individual discretion. You are probably tired of hearing this, but open fire if you think it’s necessary. If you think there’s danger, run. I’ll take responsibility, whatever happens.”

“Commander, isn’t that how it always is?” one of them asked.

“Well there’s no point in me explaining tactical activities or specific tactics to you!”

No good would come of explaining such things to people who could dodge a bullet from a sniper using just their animal instincts. Having everyone act based on their individual discretion would lead to the best results.

I decided to handle this like I always did, and I ordered everyone to board the transport craft.

**

Sometime after boarding, the pilot sent a transmission to the passenger area. “Information for all passengers. This aircraft will soon be arriving at the descent site. Please take care not to leave any belongings behind before leaving the aircraft. We also ask that Mr. Cote pay up sometime soon to cover his losses in yesterday’s poker game.” The pilot gave his transmission in falsetto and spoke as if we were paying customers.

I knitted my brow and began giving out instructions. “When that lamp turns green, those of you in the first row descend! Don’t hesitate. Let’s show Kouki what we can do.”

“In that case, I’m going to make my descent cooler by rolling in mid—uggh!”

I kicked the soldier saying stupid things through the descent hatch and followed behind him. I explained to Kouki that he should follow after us by flying down normally, so that wasn’t a problem. While we were descending, Kouki matched his speed with mine while flying around me.

“Dad, your unit is full of interesting people.”

“Kouki, please don’t turn out like these idiots. That’s my biggest worry.”

When Kouki and I landed on the beach, a subordinate came running over to give a report.

“The reconnaissance team has advanced 5 kilometers to the south. They’re checking that the area is safe.”

It seemed they’d taken the course of action they thought best without waiting for instructions from me. I was glad I allowed them to make their own decisions. That gave me some free time to ensure we had a reliable communication line between the recovery point and the aircraft on standby above.

Kouki was running off somewhere chasing a rabbit-like creature, so I told Cote and Jonathan to keep an eye on him.

The reconnaissance team contacted me once they finished their work. “This is the reconnaissance team. We have spotted a group engaged in combat 12 kilometers south of your position. We are currently observing.”

That's the last thing we need. Could they be bandits? It's possible, since this world is on the level of the medieval period.

“Tell me more about the situation,” I transmitted in response.

“There's what appears to be a group of 100 knights protecting a carriage carrying a rich-looking princess. The knights are fighting with a ridiculously big earthworm.”

The description was sketchy, but it was easy to understand. Helping them out could be a good first step toward our target of making contact with their nation. I told the reconnaissance team to hold their position and gave instructions to my subordinates waiting on the coast.

“The reconnaissance team has found a group of nobles or royalty that are being attacked. We'll rescue them if we can! Activate your optical camouflage and move out.”

We formed a circular formation with Kouki at the center, and headed for the area where the reconnaissance team was waiting. There, we saw the battle that was taking place. There were three giant earthworms and what appeared to be a group of knights who'd taken considerable damage.

“Ooh, that's an elf!” Kouki said as we watched the battle. “The enemy looks like your basic sandworm.”

“You already know about these things?!”

My subordinates were also asking questions like, “What's an elf?” and “Is sandworm the name of that monster?”

Why would Kouki know about the creatures living in this world? I guess I'll worry about that later. What I need to worry about right now is whether or not we can take them down with the weapons we've brought. I asked Kouki what he thought.

“An elf is what you’d call long-eared people, like the ones being attacked,” he said. “I think that big earthworm is a sandworm or something similar. They’re pretty tough, but I think a rifle will be enough to take care of them. And I’m quite sure they’re not intelligent.”

The earthworm certainly didn’t move like an intelligent creature. Its fighting style was more like that of a bug. I was surprised that Kouki stayed calm enough to notice the ears of the people under attack while the battle was going on. He’d only witnessed combat twice: once when he saved Alice, and again right now. I had to respect him for being able to keep his composure.

“Squad 1, target the worms with your rifles! We’ll fire on them until they stop moving. Squad 2 and Squad 3, defend the perimeter. Fire!”

On my order, the ten powered suits assigned to Squad 1 began firing their rifles.

Adrienne's Point of View

As we were on our way back from having inspected a major port named Flonne, we encountered a giant sandworm—a creature with an A-class threat rating. The 120 platinum knights defending me were all we had to fight against it. Although they were elite platinum knights, there were far too few of them for a battle against a sandworm, and our defeat seemed inevitable from the very beginning.

“Princess! Please leave us here and make your escape!” one of the knights called to me. “We can’t hold out much longer!”

“I’ll do no such thing,” I retorted. “None of you are able to use supporting magic!”

If I abandoned these knights, the supporting magic I was using to boost their base strength and magic would become ineffective. The battle would quickly turn into a one-sided massacre.

Just as the situation seemed hopeless, numerous holes appeared in the side of the sandworm. This was followed by sounds from somewhere far off. Booming sounds like ceaseless rolls of thunder.

“Something put holes in the sandworm...” I murmured. “Such a feat is beyond even an SSS-ranked adventurer. What could be happening?”

“I don’t know,” the knight said worriedly. “But it could be the work of a demon. Please stay behind me.”

A demon would never come to our rescue. The knights were confused and didn’t know how to act. The sandworm that had been such a problem was now lying lifelessly on the ground.

It can't be... A great hero has appeared to save us? This is the stuff of legends...

“On the hill! There’s something there!” a knight shouted.

I looked to where the knight was pointing. A figure had abruptly appeared out of thin air. It was a creature I had never seen before. Then more of them appeared. They appeared one after the other until finally thirty of these large creatures stood on the hill. I realized that one of the creatures had begun to walk slowly toward us.

The knights immediately adopted a defensive formation to protect me, but only fifty of them were still capable of standing.

Any creature capable of subduing those sandworms had to be capable of annihilating us with a single blow. When the distance between us and the creature had been reduced by half, it stopped and placed what appeared to be a weapon on the ground before slowly turning 360 degrees to show us its back. Now it began to walk with its hands raised high. These were the actions of a surrendering soldier. It seemed to be telling us that it intended us no harm.

“Please don’t attack, whatever might happen,” I told the knights. “I believe they are trying to communicate with us.”

None of my knights went so far as to lay down their weapons, but they did seem less tense. That was a relief to see.

The creature walked toward us agonizingly slowly before stopping twenty meters away from us. It pointed to its body as it dropped to its knees. The area it was pointing to then began moving upward so as to reveal an opening.

A man with a face covered in scars emerged from the opening before climbing down and walking toward us. I realized we were

looking at a knight who had been wearing something resembling armor.

The man spoke in a language that was unfamiliar to me. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I couldn’t understand him, so I used hand gestures to inform him that I was not about to attack, and then began using translation magic. I took care to keep my movements clear to him the whole time. Then I spoke slowly. “Can... you... understand... me?”

“Yeah, I can,” he said.

I felt relieved. The translation magic was effective. The man’s face was fearsome, but he was capable of rational discussion.

I began by expressing gratitude to him for saving me. “You’ve done me a great service by rescuing me from danger. You have my gratitude.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m guessing you’re some sort of noble. Is that right?”

What does he mean? I wondered. Could he have saved me expecting some reward?

That wouldn’t be a problem. I’d been intending to repay him from the start, but I wasn’t fond of people who requested money so shamelessly.

I replied to the man with clear displeasure in my voice, “You are correct. I am Adrienne, fourth princess of the Holy Merkava Kingdom.”

Perhaps this man will reassess his attitude now that I’ve told him I’m a princess. I hated myself for succumbing to such petty thoughts. I waited for the man’s response, and was surprised

when his reply was far from what I was expecting.

“A princess? That’s perfect. We’re Noa. We want to negotiate with your kingdom.”

I just stared at the man. *What in the world should I say to that?*

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Although I understood what the man from Noa before me was proposing, I felt at a loss.

The man suddenly pressed his hand to his ear and began talking to himself. “I’ve made successful contact. Now, what exactly—Huh? Your son? Understood.”

The man looked back at the rest of his group, shrugged his shoulders, and then spoke to me once again. “Before talking about specifics, we want to help your wounded. Can you use healing magic or anything like that? If not, we’ve got some medical supplies.”

They are offering to help the knights of a country that they’ve never heard of? I thought, amazed.

It was understandable that they’d want to place me in their debt before beginning diplomatic negotiations, but they would have been wiser to allow us to lose some knights in case negotiations broke down and it led to war.

This man said something about medical supplies. Is this group so well-provisioned that they can use valuable medical supplies on the knights of another country in place of healing magic? I need to find out more before I can judge them. Though I can’t simply allow my knights to go on suffering...

“I can use healing magic, but the most I can do is close their wounds,” I said. “Are your people familiar with painkillers?”

“Got it. I’ll get them to you right away. Do you mind if I call over my friends waiting back there?”

“By all means.”

In the end, I decided to accept the offer made by the people of Noa. I wanted to help the knights who were suffering, even if there was a chance I’d regret accepting their offer.

The man put his hand to his ear once again. He spoke two or three words, and then more of the armored soldiers waiting on the hill began to move toward us. The largest set of armor remained still, though. It appeared to be protected by other suits of armor at either side.

Could it be that their leader is being cautious? I wondered.

Another man emerged from one of the suits of armor that were arriving one after another. “Nice to meet you, princess. I’m Shuuichi, the commander of this unit. Sorry to be hasty, but could you have your knights put their weapons away before we treat your wounded?”

I urged my knights to put away their weapons. The majority were already eager to welcome these men after hearing that their companions were about to receive treatment. They put away their weapons without hesitation.

After the commanding officer named Shuuichi saw this, he put his hand to his ear and began to speak. It seemed they were using some sort of magical item to communicate over long distances. “Kouki, we’ve made sure it’s safe. You can come over now.”

The moment the commanding officer finished speaking, the

large suit of armor standing on the hill rose into the air. I'd seen supporting magic used to strengthen the legs so that one could jump over long distances, and I'd seen wind magic used to make people float, but flight was only possible for creatures with wings.

The suit of armor slowly flying toward us from the hilltop was the color and size of a demon.

"A demon..." I whispered as I watched it fly.

The atmosphere became tense. The people of Noa smiled in spite of their hard faces as they offered to help our wounded. But now they were scowling angrily. My knights became noticeably fearful when they saw those smiles disappear.

They were both looking at me. I eventually realized that I'd said something incredibly rude. I desperately searched for the words to apologize, but the commanding officer spoke before I could.

"Princess," he said in a low voice. "I'll forget what you just said. But I'll have to ask you not to use the word 'demon' in the presence of that suit."

I nodded in agreement so forcefully that I almost injured my neck. The commanding officer was so angry. That armor... what they called a suit, could only be carrying a noble to whom they'd pledged their lives. Perhaps if that noble was accused of being a demon, he would kill them all in his rage.

The noble wearing the suit then flew before me and spoke to me from inside the suit. "Nice to meet you. My name is Kouki Arakawa."

"I'm Adrienne de Merkava, fourth princess of the Holy Merkava Kingdom."

I greeted him with the most elegant courtesy I could manage. He had given a surname, which meant he was at the very least a noble, if not a prince. I was pleased with myself for having made the correct decision earlier. But then the captain of my platinum knights said something that almost made me faint.

“Have you no manners?! How dare you address our princess without removing your armor?!”

You’re the one being rude here! I thought frantically. Try to understand the situation we’re in! They just wiped out those A-class monsters so effortlessly, and now they’re liberally using their medical supplies on people from another country. They are clearly from some great nation. Even on our own continent, our kingdom is treated as a small nation. They are so much greater than we are. You bring shame on your kingdom by speaking so rudely to the nobility of a great nation!

I trembled at the thought of inciting the anger of the people of Noa. But then the suit dropped to one knee and its chest opened.

“Forgive my rudeness. Allow me to introduce myself once more. My name is Kouki Arakawa.”

“Uwah...”

“Muh...”

The captain and I simultaneously gasped in surprise at the sight of the boy who appeared from within the suit.

After the boy named Kouki had repeated his self-introduction, he formed a right angle with his right hand and raised his fingers to his forehead. It was the most elegant gesture and a striking display of refinement. I fell in love instantly. The next thing I noticed was the clothing he was wearing.

There wasn't a patch of dirt on his clothes. He was wearing ceremonious-looking clothes that were whiter than any I had ever seen, and his shoulders were adorned with gold and black. On his chest there was an emblem of wings adorned with text, which was most likely his national flag. Even his buttons sparkled as though they were made of gold.

I would have believed it if he told me his clothes were made by the gods themselves.

"How are your knights?" he asked.

"Hah? Ah... Yes! The analgesics you have given us are most effective. They are able to stand and walk again."

"I see. We call that analgesic morphine. You shouldn't overuse it. Please have them receive treatment from a medical professional once they return home."

Medical professional? Treatment? It seems as though his country doesn't just have doctors that care for the royal family; they have a system where doctors will even care for ordinary knights.

When ordinary knights were injured in our kingdom, they would be nursed by other knights or taken care of by healers dispatched from the church. This meant that they didn't have a very high survival rate after being badly injured. It would have been incredibly expensive for the kingdom to take care of all injured knights.

Could Kouki's country be big enough to afford such a burden?

"If you'd like, I could call our field medics?" he added.

Once again, the boy named Kouki said something surprising and hard to comprehend.

If they have a specialized team of medics, that puts them far above the level of our kingdom! I can't allow us to become further indebted to Noa. Perhaps we should return to the fortress?

The fortress was where the iron knights—the strongest knights in our kingdom—were stationed. They'd be able to deal with whatever situation might arise. Moreover, it would be necessary to contact the capital before we could enter into diplomatic negotiations.

“Might we return to the fortress first?” I asked hesitantly. “Could we also postpone your proposal until we have been able to visit the fortress? I'll need to contact His Majesty...”

“I'm fine with that. I think that would be in our favor, too,” their commanding officer said.

I was relieved to hear they were willing to accompany us to the fortress. I asked my knights to load the injured into my carriage, and I climbed onto a free horse.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

As we were traveling toward the fortress, Dad spoke to me via a video call: "Treating their knights is one thing, but did we really need to bring our field medics?"

"Making a good impression now will give us an advantage in the negotiations later," I said. "And I don't like the idea of letting their people suffer."

My dad was a military man, so he was used to seeing this kind of thing, but I couldn't just stand by and leave people to bleed and suffer. And these were knights who'd been willing to give their lives to defend their master. They deserved to be treated as heroes, in my opinion.

My dad's response to this was, "If you say so."

It was probably hard for someone in the military to understand these feelings. More importantly...

"Dad, the clothes you gave me before we set out... I know it's a little late to ask, but what's with this outfit?! Why do I have to wear a military uniform? And why did I have to greet with a salute?"

"Don't you think it's cool?" he asked. "That's T.M.N.'s formal uniform. It's based on what the US Navy call 'full dress whites.' By the way, it's a rule that only commanding officers and above can wear that uniform. The uniform even shows your rank. You and Alice will be treated as special major generals!"

"Major generals? Are you crazy?! What are you thinking? You only have 300 soldiers in your unit. Why would you need to give out ranks as high as major general?!"

I give up, I thought in disgust. I thought I had my dad all wrong, and I'd even started calling him "Dad" again. I should have stuck with "Macho Man." Actually, maybe "Macho Gorilla" is more fitting?

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "There are 100,000 people making up Noa right now, and 80,000 of those are part of our military. We haven't actually given you the authority to give commands during combat, but on paper, you can command a force on the scale of a brigade. You'd probably be good at it, so maybe we should give you your own independent mixed brigade sometime soon."

You ask me what I'm talking about, but you're the one talking nonsense! I thought indignantly. How could we have gotten so big? Last time I spoke to Mom about it, she said there were about 20,000 of us. How could we grow so quickly? Also, I remember Macho Man bragging, "I'm the administrator of general military affairs and the supreme commander of T.M.N.!" But how can a supreme commander casually run off into another world? Shouldn't he be back on Earth overseeing things from a comfortable chair?

At least now I understood why Clare had been lecturing me on the correct way to salute recently. They were getting ready to force the role of major general on me.

"I'm curious," Macho Man said. "How do you know about these 'elves' and 'sandworms'?"

The answer was simple, but not something I could explain. What I may have called a "subculture" before my reincarnation didn't exist in this world. In particular, there was no "otaku culture."

When I first met Shingo, I'd asked him, "Do you ever watch

anime?” and I was shocked when he’d replied, “Buh hee? Why would I watch kids’ shows?”

Manga was virtually nonexistent, which was one of the main reasons I’d drawn pictures in my spare time as a child. Things like elves and dragons were only of interest to people who liked complicated myths, so most people were only vaguely aware of them.

Now what? I’ll be sent to get my head examined if I say I remember it from a past life, and I can’t think of a good excuse. Maybe I can just brush it aside like Mom would...

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. Do you understand? Don’t worry about it.”

“R-Right.”

Macho Man must have seen something of my mom in my smile. His response was instant, and he smiled as if he was staring death in the face.

As always, I couldn’t remember anything related to myself, but I did remember a strong sense of enjoyment from my past life. I didn’t know what it was that I enjoyed so much in the past, but I was sure that I lived a blessed life.

Just as I was becoming sentimental, my thoughts were interrupted by the video call.

“If you don’t want to tell me about the experience, that’s fine,” Macho Man said with a sympathetic look on his face. “But your knowledge is valuable. It might even be something incredibly precious that only you have. So don’t look so down because of it. Hold your head up high.”

For the first time in a long while—a great long while—Macho

Man actually said something you'd expect to hear from a good father. I decided not to call him Macho Gorilla for now. My mood improved as the fortress came into view and I imagined what might be waiting inside.

**

Once we reached the entrance to the fortress, a group of knights noticed us, and we had to stop while they questioned the princess about us. I thought that having such a high-ranking individual with us would be enough to get us into the fortress; I was wrong.

“Princess!” a knight announced. “These people can’t be allowed to enter the fortress unless they lay down their weapons.”

“Please, you must make an exception,” she pleaded.

“I can’t do that,” he retorted. “Things may be peaceful right now, but I’m sure you’re aware that our kingdom is preparing for war. And we certainly can’t trust someone wearing such demonic-looking arm—mgh.”

Adrienne... Maybe I should call her Addie for short? Addie was quick to cover the mouth of that knight, I thought. I wonder why. It’s probably my suit that looks demonic. This exterior design that Shingo and I came up with is pretty cool, if you ask me.

My suit’s thrusters were carefully positioned to make the suit resemble a demon named “Satanachia” from my memories of my past life. I was proud of how it managed to be both cool and yet strangely menacing.

We weren’t making any progress, so I transmitted a suggestion to Macho Man. “Dad, why don’t we remove our suits? We could take just our handheld weapons with us.”

“That might help. I’ll talk to them about that. If we do go into the fortress without armor, make sure you stay near Cote and Johnathan at all times. They’ll be better fighters than me if we have to fight indoors, so they’ll keep you safe. This may require a bit of acting. Keep your mouth shut and leave it to us.”

It was hard to imagine that Johnathan was a good fighter because he was the quiet, scholarly type. I was sure Cote was a strong fighter because his face was so covered in scars, though.

I remembered Cote laughing while telling me, “I ran into a grizzly bear while I was out fishing one time. It was a good thing I had my knife with me.” I was sure that anyone who could get into a knife fight with a bear and live to tell the tale could handle an attack from some elven knights.

“Looks like this is causing an argument,” Macho Man said as he opened up his suit’s cockpit. “How about if everyone who’s going inside takes their suit off first?” he suggested to the knights with a smile.

“I’m sorry about this,” Addie said to him. “Thank you for cooperating.”

“That’s not good enough! I need them completely unarmed!” yelled the knight behind her as she was bowing her head.

I hope we’re not causing her too much trouble. We may have arrived fully armed, but all we want to do is send in a delegation to start diplomatic negotiations.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Macho Man said to the knight in a low voice. “If you’re sure you want to turn my advance team away, then that’s fine. We’ll just return to the main unit and tell them, ‘We were able to make contact with them, but we’ve had to come back because one of their knights turned us away.’ At the end of the day, whatever ‘judgment’ the main unit

makes regarding your country, that's not my problem."

I guess this is what he meant by acting. It's not quite gunboat diplomacy, but he's really putting pressure on them. We can't actually use force because Mom has tied our hands, but from the knights' point of view, we may as well have said, "Well, we'll be seeing you. Don't blame us if this turns into a war."

The knight was looking noticeably pale.

He did say they're preparing for war, so there must be some sort of conflict going on somewhere. Now he's worried that he's about to earn his kingdom a new enemy. If I was him, I'd be wetting myself right now.

Macho Man delivered the final blow: "Prepare to withdraw! We're returning to Noa Island. Princess, I'm sorry but we will have to leave you."

The rest of the unit understood what was going on and began preparing to withdraw. I played along by igniting my thrusters and rising into the air. That's when the knight, still looking pale, reluctantly changed his mind.

"Gah... If it's just five of you entering, I might be able to allow you to carry weapons. I'd like the rest to wait outside. Please understand that we must consider the princess's safety."

Now I understood. These knights were no different from the knights who'd fought the sandworm: they just wanted to protect Addie.

I felt a little guilty as we entered the fortress.

**

On our way into the fortress, we were asked to remove our

suits in the center of a large area that looked like a plaza. We did as we were told.

As soon as I was out of my suit, Cote and Johnathan quickly came running to my side, holding bullpup style rifles to ensure my safety. It was a little embarrassing.

“Four of us are armed,” Macho Man announced. “The one wearing the white uniform is under our protection, so he’s not. We’ve made a lot of compromises here. Is this enough?”

“Thank you for your cooperation.” The knight had become a lot more hospitable. “I’d like to apologize once again for my behavior.”

I responded, “We’re sorry, too.”

Addie guided us into the fortress. It was like something from a fantasy novel. Knights carrying spears that looked like battle hooks were standing in strategic positions along a corridor.

Are all those things actually usable? I wondered. To me, they looked more like ceremonial weapons. I made sure to get a good look at everything as we walked.

Finally, we were led into an extravagant room where we were asked to wait.

“Please wait here while I make contact with the capital,” Addie said. “A maid will soon arrive to serve tea, so please take this opportunity to rest.”

“All right,” Macho Man said gruffly. “But my men will worry if I leave them waiting outside for too long. Is it okay to send out a messenger every once in a while?”

“Yes. Please ask the knight behind you whenever you want to

send someone out. His name is Crovence. He'll guide you outside."

With that, Addie left the room.

So this knight watching over us is named Crovence? I looked over in his direction and saw him standing motionless like a statue with his arms folded. He looked as though he was all muscles and no brains, kind of like Macho Man, except Crovence made it look good.

After I was done sneaking glances at him, I decided to kill some time by asking Macho Man something that had been bothering me since we first arrived. "Hey, we saw some villages before we got here, right? Why were they so far apart from each other? Wouldn't transport and trade be more efficient if things were concentrated in one place?"

"You did well to notice that," Macho Man replied with a grin. "Those weren't villages. Those were military installations cleverly disguised as villages. They're probably similar to disposable pill-boxes used to buy time during a battle. There were way more guards than you'd expect to see in an ordinary village. They did say that they were preparing for war. I think those installations are part of it."

"Ahem." We heard Crovence behind us clearing his throat after he heard Macho Man's explanation. It seemed he was uncomfortable at hearing us openly discussing his kingdom's secret affairs.

We waited in silence until there was a knock at the door and a maid entered the room with a tea trolley.

It was exciting to see a real-life maid pouring our tea. She loaded six teacups onto a tray and carried it toward us.

Why six cups? I watched, baffled, as Crovence moved to stand before the table.

“Which one?” he asked.

“This one, please,” Macho Man said.

At Crovence’s request, Macho Man picked a cup from the tray at random and passed it to him.

Oh! It’s a test for poison! If he’ll drink from a cup that we’ve chosen at random, it suggests none of them are poisoned.

Crovence gulped down the tea until the cup was empty. “Please enjoy the tea,” he said before returning to his position.

That was amazing. Is this kind of thing standard practice? It’s actually pretty cool how Macho Man... how Dad knew exactly how to handle the situation just now.

I was looking at my dad with admiration when he suddenly gave orders to Cote and Johnathan, who were standing directly behind him.

“Cote! Johnathan! Move your fingers away from your triggers. Put your weapons behind your backs and stand ready for inspection.”

Cote and Johnathan looked ready to fire their rifles, but now they stood to attention. I could hear their boots against the floor as they both adopted a precise pose. They looked every bit as cool as Crovence behind them.

“Those are well-trained elite soldiers,” Crovence commented. “Few armed men in this kingdom could respond so quickly to an order. The knights of my kingdom could learn from them.”

“I’m proud of these men,” Dad said. “That said, the knights of your kingdom seem quite well-trained. I saw those... do you call them sandworms? You’ve got some troublesome creatures in this kingdom. It’s no small feat to be able to carry out a mission if it means that every single knight has to hold their ground against those things.”

Crovence and my dad were praising each other’s soldiers.

Is this what a political discussion looks like? I wondered.

I had nothing to add to the discussion. I just hoped that Addie would return soon.

**

We must have been waiting for about two hours. Addie entered the room out of breath.

“I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting! I have just finished contacting the capital.”

Dad and Crovence had been enjoying a friendly conversation until Addie entered the room. Now they wore more solemn expressions. Likewise, I swallowed as I listened to what Addie had to say.

“It has been decided that the Merkava Kingdom will hear your country’s proposals. However, this cannot happen immediately. You have been invited to attend diplomatic negotiations in the capital at a later date. Please use that opportunity to discuss the specifics with His Majesty.”

“That’s fine by me,” Dad said. “Can you give us a more specific time?”

“Could you return to this fortress in thirty days’ time?”

Thirty days? Well, I guess that's all right.

I gave Dad a look that said, "I think that's all right."

He seemed to understand and nodded to me before replying to Addie. "Got it. We'll see you in thirty days."

Dad immediately rose to his feet and said, "Excuse me, I must contact our main unit."

Crovence guided him outside.

I hated to up and leave as soon as our work was done, but it was hard to do otherwise because we were being cautious. I quietly followed behind.

Dad spoke to Addie about our next visit while he was putting his suit back on in the plaza. "We'll dispatch a messenger before our next visit. The messenger will tell you exactly how big our delegation will be. Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine. We may not be particularly large nation, but we are quite capable of acting as a host to your delegation."

"Well then, we're off," said Dad. "See you soon."

Dad finished the conversation quickly and then ordered the entire reconnaissance team to withdraw. Unlike when we arrived, everyone except me was able to travel at their suit's top speed. I thought we'd been rude to the kingdom, so I sent a message to my dad to warn him.

"Dad, don't you think we were a little rude? We should have talked to them more..."

"Kouki, negotiations are your mother's job. We're hurrying home!"

What's he talking about? The negotiations aren't for another thirty days, so why are you getting so fired up already?

“You idiot! Your mom is on Earth! Thirty days will be up for her in thirty hours from now. Now that you understand, you should be flying back to Noa Island and hurrying through the gate by yourself. Now's the time to break the sound barrier.”

“Ooooh! Got it!”

I quickly pushed the red button to the side of my operation panel... and broke the sound barrier.

As I rapidly accelerated my suit, I began to wonder...

There was a fifth person from our unit standing behind Cote and Johnathan. Who was that? He was like a ghost.

**

Adrienne's Point of View

After the people from Noa had returned, I called Crovence, the captain of my iron knights, to my chambers. Crovence was looking stern as I asked him to take a seat.

“What do you think of these people from Noa?” I asked.

“I would rather we never have to see them again.”

“That’s unlike you. Did something happen?”

“There are three reasons.”

Before explaining himself, he got up to check that no one was listening outside the door.

“Firstly, they all appear to have received a high level of education. There’s nothing in the way they look, act, or talk to suggest that they’re from a small or uncultured nation. I’m quite sure that they’re from a great nation.

“In addition to that, there was the young prince dressed in the white military uniform. He was looking around the fortress with great curiosity from the moment he stepped inside. At first, I thought he must be one of those princes who’s never set foot outside, traveling with delegation to see something of the world. However...”

“That guess was wrong?” I asked.

I didn’t suspect that I was wrong to think he was a noble on the basis of his uniform, but I hadn’t gotten the impression that he was particularly strong. He didn’t appear to be trained, nor did he appear to have a high level of magical power. He allowed his guards to make contact with us as if they were pawns while he

waited on the hill. It had made him seem cowardly.

“He was looking at our guards,” said Crovence. “He noticed the positions of them... and then he took note of the types of weapons they were holding. He was assessing the power of this fortress. That is beyond doubt. He even saw through our outer defense stations. This leads me to believe that he has received an unusually high level of military training.”

“They know about those?!” I exclaimed. “But... how?”

“I’m not sure. But I do know they’ve learned how many guards are guarding each village. I heard it straight from their commanding officer himself.”

I took great care to ensure that our route back to the fortress hadn’t taken them through any of the villages. *How could they have seen through our trick?* I broke into a cold sweat as Crovence continued.

“The second thing is their healing technology. Three of the platinum knights fighting the sandworm had lost legs. The bleeding had been stopped while they were being carried home. The priests we dispatched from the fortress thought it best for them to simply rest in bed. However, the medics from Noa said, ‘Where are their dismembered legs?’ which was at first taken for a joke. But when a recovered leg was given to the medics, they set up something like a transparent tent, gave the knight drugs to make him sleep, and then... cut into his wounds with small knives.”

Imagining such a scene filled me with shock and outrage. *Only men from the most barbaric of nations could think to further humiliate a wounded knight that had fought bravely!*

“Here’s the shocking part. After they’d cut open the wound, they spent a long time sewing the leg back onto the knight’s body. Once they were finished, the blood flow returned to the leg, and

the knight was able to move his toes to some extent. Before leaving, they waited for the knight to awaken and told him, ‘It’ll never be like it was, but with training, you’ll be able to walk again.’”

The revival of a dismembered leg would be a difficult feat even for the great wizards from legends.

“Could these people be capable of raising the dead?” I asked Crovence, half in jest.

“I asked the same question to my men in jest, much like you, Princess. Their response was vague: ‘If the heart has stopped for only five minutes, we can probably fix it with an AED.’ I suspect what they meant was, ‘it’s possible, but a matter of military secrecy.’”

“This is making me feel dizzy...”

“Me, too,” Crovence replied.

If all of this was true, we would be forced to negotiate with a nation beyond our imagining. It seemed unlikely that the conditions of any agreement between us would be in our favor. Even the most idiotic of our kingdom’s nobility would have to understand that. But if the agreement proved unworkable... *Would we have the slightest hope of winning such a terrible war?*

“Could we defeat Noa?” I asked shakily.

Crovence bit his lip before he responded to my question. “That’s the third reason. Their medics abruptly materialized in front of the fortress. I therefore believe that Noa are capable of deploying forces wherever they please. The biggest problem is that... unlike the traveling formations of the demon lord’s army, we cannot predict the movements of Noa. We can’t know how far they’re able to move. It may be that they’re capable of simply placing their forces in the center of the capital. In the event of

war, our situation would be hopeless.”

It was laughable. Their soldiers were capable of defeating an A-class monster. If just one of those soldiers entered the capital, the damage would be incredible.

We had thirty days until the next delegation came to visit. I would have to talk to His Majesty and my older sisters to form an effective plan.

✱✱

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

I returned to Earth by hurrying through the gate as soon as I arrived at Noa Island. After removing my suit, I ran to the lab where I'd find Mom.

I knocked on the door to the lab, and out stepped my mom, looking sleepy. "Mom! Mom! Listen."

"Kou, what is it?"

"We've agreed to talk with a kingdom in the other world. It'll be in thirty days. Thirty days!" I said, frantically trying to communicate the details.

Mom put her finger to her jaw and said, "Mm. Mmmm. I see. You've made contact with a nation in the other world, and there will be talks in thirty days' time. But in this world, that's in thirty hours, so you had to hurry back?"

Geniuses are amazing! She understood even though I was struggling to get the point across.

"But why were you in such a hurry to get back?" she asked. "There's no point hurrying when you're in the other world. If you save an hour over there, that's just a few minutes here."

"B-Because Dad said I had to hurry!" I stammered.

She was right. There hadn't been much point in me hurrying back at top speed. But it was too embarrassing to admit my mistake, so I put the blame on Macho Man.

"Ah. It was your dad's idea. That's disappointing... I know he's not the smartest person, but I thought he could at least do basic math."

I didn't realize, either! But let's forget about that; we need to talk about the negotiations.

Although we made successful contact with the kingdom, it hadn't been decided who'd attend the talks. We could have just left it up to Macho Man, but leaving those things to our fighters was probably not the best idea.

Mom agreed. With a smile similar to the one she used when punishing Dad, she said, "Of course. Negotiation is what your mother does best. It'll be me, Clare, and Elise."

I had a bad feeling about this. I'd been getting on well with Cote, and he told me that those three were known as the "three witches" of the Hakone base because it was a big mistake to make any of them angry.

I never made them angry myself, but I did remember how Macho Man once collapsed in the corner of the room like a worn-out old rag after receiving a punishment from Mom. That was when I was three or four years old. I decided to never make Mom angry.

"Do you want to come along, Kou?" she asked.

"No!" I said hastily. "I'll just wait on the island. I want to look at the birds."

I didn't even want to see my mom during a serious discussion. It would probably make me relive my past trauma. The only reason I agreed to go to the other world in the first place was so I could see the unusual animals on Noa Island.

"What language did they speak?" she asked. "Could you understand them?"

"Someone there was using translation magic. The language

wasn't a problem."

"Magic... If we can't understand the actual language, I won't be able to check that the translation magic is accurate. I don't mind learning their language, but I'm not sure how I'll find the time..."

Mom started mumbling to herself when the conversation turned to translation magic. I stayed quiet for a while. It seemed she wanted to confirm what people actually said in the other world was the same as what the translation magic converted it into. She was casually talking about learning the language herself, but I couldn't see how she'd have time.

Could anyone besides my mom pull it off? Actually, I do know someone...

When it came to languages, there was a teacher with long, straight blonde hair named Miss Roberta. Aikawa told me that there wasn't a person on Earth who could learn languages faster than Miss Roberta. I put this to the test by teaching her Russian, and she mastered it within twenty minutes. It was terrifying.

The really mysterious thing about this teacher was that the main subject she taught was music.

I told Mom about her.

"And this teacher is exceptional?" Mom asked.

"Yes, she's a monster."

"I'll ask for her cooperation," Mom said, accepting that.

It felt a little good to have Mom find my opinion useful for once.

There was an announcement as Clare's voice played through-

out the entire base: “Could Mrs. Arakawa please head for the gate on level 5... ASAP. The brainless gorillas returning from the other world are about to break the gate.”

I guessed that Macho Man and the others were returning from Noa Island all at once. They probably hadn’t given any thought to the time lag, and were creating chaos because of the difference between the speed at which they entered the gate and the speed at which they left.

A blood vessel appeared on Mom’s temple as she told me, “I’ll be back soon, so please wait here,” before turning to leave.

“Wait!” I shouted after her. “We had to fight with sandworms in the other world. The worms are big and kind of scary, so I want to take something besides a suit to protect me.”

“It looks like your dad got into a fight while you were there, despite all the warnings I gave him. I’m going to strangle him later... What did you want to take?”

There was a grassy plain around the fortress, so there’s probably a similar environment throughout the rest of the kingdom. That means I can use that thing! I realized.

A while back, I asked my mom to create the most awesome weapon.

That thing is so big and the armor is so thick and sturdy. It’ll be the safest thing to use.

“I want that thing. I want to take the tank you made recently!”

“A tank... You can’t mean?! Are you serious? Well, if you think you need it... I understand. I’ll make preparations, but we’ve only completed two units so far.”

I nodded, and Mom ran off to the gate with a look of disbelief.

I planned to force Mom to ride in it to keep her safe. I'd never seen the real thing myself, so I was trying to imagine it as I walked over to the residential area to get something to eat.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I borrowed a bulldozer from a construction department before heading to the gate, and then I ascended to level 5 in the elevator.

When the elevator doors opened, I found a few dozen powered suits that had become stuck together in one great clump. I pressed my right foot to the accelerator with all of my strength.

I lowered the bulldozer blade to the ground and rammed it into the powered suits to move them all against the wall. I didn't know what the shock would feel like for the people in the suits, but I knew it wasn't enough to kill them. Right now, the gate was more important than those idiots.

"This'll do for now," I said briskly. "I expect Elise will be arriving last, so I leave it up to her to deal with you. It's her responsibility to keep you idiots in order."

I climbed down from the bulldozer and approached Clare with a smile.

"Clare, let's move to phase 2 of this operation. Please tell all the bases belonging to Noa to enter the other world using their disposable gates. Have them move their resources to the other world, too. Especially the large supply of food and makeshift barracks we've prepared in the Russian base."

"How much personnel, firepower, and resources should we have them transfer?" Clare asked irritably.

I mustn't have said it very clearly.

Clare probably wanted to say, "I have no idea how much you need, so please be a little more precise." But she misunderstood what I meant.

“Everything. Every base other than the Hakone base will be sealed off within 78 hours. After each base has been relocated, have the gate technicians head for the Hakone base after they’ve destroyed all evidence. If intelligence agencies from other countries become aware of what’s happening and try to prevent them from leaving, we’ll come to their aid. They should make the transfer as soon as the large weapons, the *Tolstoy*, and the space destroyers are ready to move over.”

“But we don’t know what’s going on at the other side of the gate,” she objected.

“I’m not worrying about that,” I said. “We know that our island is secure because the reconnaissance team has been able to contact a nation within the other world. And the island must be big enough if Kouki wants to take that thing there. Now we just need to use the time lag to construct our base there while moving the resources over. It’s going to take some time, but we’ve prepared simple residential facilities to deal with that problem.”

That was enough to satisfy Clare. She began dispatching instructions to each base.

“What is this thing that Kouki insists on taking with him?” Clare added.

I suppose I better show her it. The second unit was named after her, in fact.

I told Clare to come with me and we headed for the special technology region.

**

Clare was clearly excited as we boarded an elevator that only engineering staff with special permission could ride under ordinary circumstances.

“Are you nervous?” I asked in as friendly a voice as possible.

“Yes. This area is guarded by a group that the commander oversees personally, so I’ve never visited it. We’re careful with sensitive information even within our own unit, so I know nothing about it, and now I’m really nervous.”

It seemed that Shuuichi never told her about this region, even though she was his adjutant.

It took some time to reach the region because we had to construct it somewhat far off as a precaution against accidents. I told her exactly what it was we had constructed here.

“Some time ago, Kouki was assigned to the Creation Program to freely produce a weapon of his own imagining. Later, I was shocked when I saw the creation files.”

“What did he design?”

“It was a large-scale tank with a mass of approximately 35,000 tons, a length of 290 meters, and a height of 30 meters.”

“Wha?! A tank that big won’t even be able to move. It’ll sink into the ground.”

I initially thought the same thing. I laughed and thought that such a thing was beyond even Kouki. But he remained serious as he explained the plan to me.

In one of my workplaces known as the Next-Generation Scientific Research Institute, we were developing new, lightweight metals in our new metal research department. Despite working there, even I’d forgotten its existence. It was a small department with only thirteen researchers. It was unclear if the department was worthwhile because the development of their new metals was expected to take another ten years. But Kouki suggested that I

give my full support to the department head.

In truth, I was happy to see Kouki pursuing something purely for the sake of his own interest. I handled the research costs by personally supplying funds to the department head, who hadn't expected any increases in their financing.

After receiving cover for expenses that were twenty times their yearly operating costs, the researchers were filled with new enthusiasm and successfully developed a new metal within a single week.

It turned out they hadn't been pursuing their research seriously after being looked down upon and being denied the funding they required. Yet they'd only been a short way from achieving their goals. Kouki realized this in a short amount of time and with minimal information, and his support for the research department led to him obtaining the lightweight metal that he'd wanted.

Those researchers had now been transferred to Noa, but uncharacteristically for technical staff, they joined Noa for Kouki's sake.

All of this was a surprise to Clare. "So, did they complete it?"

"Yes. Thanks to the new metal, the structure was made far stronger than it would have been."

The elevator reached our destination, and the doors opened. I could tell Clare was holding her breath as she gazed at the massive object lying in a large-scale dock.

"This is the large-scale multi-weapon tank that Kouki proposed. This is *Unit #1*. It's the 'Alice-type ground unit,' or 'Alice' for short."

The Alice-type ground unit... Even when Kouki had been ex-

plaining it all to me, I wanted to ask him what on Earth he was planning with this thing. It weighed approximately 7,500 tons, had a length of 311 meters, was 28 meters tall, and could use a snorkel while partially submerged. There were two mounting positions for three coaxial 26-centimeter cannons and 40 vertical launch system missiles installed at the rear.

In addition, groups of four coaxial 20-millimeter anti-personnel and anti-aircraft cannons were installed here and there, making the thing look like a hedgehog. It could carry 30 powered suits in addition to the ordinary crew.

When I tried using my terminal to determine how well it would perform, I concluded that it could easily obliterate an entire Ground Self-Defense Force division. I then decided that I didn't want to think about it further.

"I hate to surprise you like this, Clare, but the name of the second unit is 'Clare.' It seems Kouki gives them the names of women he knows. He did say something like, 'Giving a ship the name of a woman is good luck.'"

"M-Me?! But why?"

Don't ask me. I can understand why he'd want to name the first unit after Alice, but the second unit should have been named after me! If he tries to name the third unit Elise or Roberta, I'll... Oh, I've totally forgotten. Didn't Kouki advise me to get the cooperation of a teacher at the academy named Roberta?

Now that I remembered, I raised the subject with Clare.

"Roberta from the academy?" replied Clare, looking at me strangely. "You mean Roberta Scarlet?"

"That's probably right. Do you know her?" I asked.

“I know her,” Clare replied with a sour expression.

Did something happen between them? Even if something did happen in the past, I need her cooperation right now.

“I expect she’ll cooperate,” Clare said. “But... I hope you realize she won’t come cheap.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll just consider it a necessary expense.”

Clare began to prepare a message using her terminal.

If she wants money, I suppose she’ll demand payment before she arrives. I’m fine with that. As long as she works for the money that she’s paid.

“Robby?” Clare said as her call connected. “It’s Clare. Are you sleeping? It’s noon already. Get out of bed.”

It seemed Roberta had been asleep. Even though it was summer vacation, I was a little unnerved to hear that a teacher was sleeping so late on a weekday.

“I want to tell you about a job opportunity,” Clare said. “Wait! Don’t hang up. What about one of those cakes from the French confectionery place? I’ll give you the whole thing... Okay, fine, wine, too. What? Okay, meat, too. I’ll come to meet you so be prepared for my arrival.”

It seemed this person wasn’t interested in money; it was food she wanted.

“Well that’s quite cute, isn’t it?” I said to Clare with a smile.

“Robby eats and then she eats,” Clare replied crossly. “She can eat enough food for five people in a single meal. And then she doesn’t get fat. I can’t stand her!”

If there was time, I would have to thoroughly examine Roberta once she arrived at the Hakone base.

With that decided, I headed back to my room with Clare to take care of some remaining business.

Chapter 3: Political Strategy Team: Let's Negotiate!

Adrienne's Point of View

Once everyone from Noa had left, the royal family spent each day in meetings with His Majesty in attendance. To begin with, we had to decide whether we would outright refuse any unfair conditions that Noa tried to force upon us, or whether we'd seek a compromise.

The influential nobles refused to believe me when I tried to describe the power of Noa to them. "A-class monsters cannot be exterminated so simply!" they argued.

The actions that our kingdom would take were finally set out in a single statement by my older sister Cassis. "The opinions of all present have been considered. We will mobilize every available knight in the kingdom and have them gather in the fortress with ceremonial equipment. We will do so on the pretense of offering the highest level of hospitality to Noa. If it turns out they are a minor nation, they will come to fear us."

It was undeniable that this crude approach was our only available option. So we gathered 8,000 men from throughout the kingdom, leaving just a minimum number of fighters to defend against attacks by the demon lord's forces. All of the knights gathered from each area were now here in the fortress.

A group of knights representing our kingdom were arranged and made ready to greet the arrivals from Noa. These included the strongest Iron Knights at the front, the Platinum Knights, the

Holy Rose Knights, and the Great Eagle Knights. But all that wasn't enough to alleviate my fears.

I waited with a heavy heart as a set of armor—the type they called a suit—appeared and began approaching the plaza at high speed. I had already prepared my translation magic and was ready to use it for the messenger.

“Long time no see, Princess,” the messenger said. “I’m only here to let you know how big our delegation is. Is that okay?”

“Scoundrel! Have you no manners?! Kneel before the princess,” an Eagle Knight snarled.

I glared at the Eagle Knight who'd spoken so condescendingly. *Please don't create further problems for us...*

I desperately tried to ignore the cramp in my stomach while asking how large the party from Noa would be.

“We’re sending 23,000 people as part of an advance team,” the messenger replied. “Another 32,000 from the main unit will arrive half a day later. There’ll be 55,000 personnel in total. I’m sure you’ll take good care of them.”

I had to take a moment to steady myself as I felt as close to fainting. *A delegation of that size clearly has more in mind than peaceful negotiations!*

The angry knight standing beside me had gone pale.

We're finished... Our kingdom is done for.

All I could do was force a smile for the messenger. The destruction of our kingdom seemed inevitable.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“The suit dispatched to the fortress is returning from a bearing of 0-0-1.”

“Acknowledged. Have him land on rear unit *Bee* #2. Make immediate preparations to guide his landing.”

The Combat Information Center (CIC) of the land battleship *Alice* was lit by a pale blue glow as the captain gave out instructions to operator personnel. I recognized our captain as the former *Tolstoy* captain.

How come he's in command of a land battleship now? I wondered absentmindedly. The captain stood up from his seat and turned to face me.

“The scout has returned, Sir,” he said to me with a salute. “The *Alice* will be departing in one hour. Do you approve?”

“I'll leave it to you,” I replied.

The captain saluted again and returned to his seat.

Clare spoke to me next. “Sir, since we have time, can I get you something to drink?”

“If you don't mind.”

“I'll prepare something myself,” she said with a smile.

I sat back in my chair as Clare turned to leave. Approximately thirty CIC personnel were busy at work below me. Meanwhile, I was sitting here doing nothing, but no one was complaining. I felt incredibly out of place as Clare returned with some coffee.

“It’s hot, so please be careful,” she said.

The rich aroma of the coffee helped put me at ease. It had been four hours since we departed from Noa Island, so I decided it was about time I asked what was going on.

“Clare, can I ask you something?”

“Please, go ahead.”

“Why did you put me in the admiral’s chair?”

Clare tilted her head curiously as if I asked her something strange. “Kouki—pardon me, Major General. A major general’s rank is equivalent to an admiral. I believe the admiral’s chair is appropriate. But if you’d prefer to retire to your room until the operation begins...”

“No, this is fine. Sorry for asking difficult questions. I’ll let you get back to your work.”

Clare began operating the communications equipment to establish contact with *Unit #2 Clare*.

That wasn’t what I meant, I thought. That wasn’t what I was asking you! I want to know why it’s me here in the admiral’s chair of Unit #1 acting as supreme commander to 25,000 members of the advance team. For some strange reason, no one seemed to think this was unusual. What if I shout, “All forces, attack the fortress!”? Will they actually do it?!

Uneasily, I decided, *I may as well watch this documentary about the life of Earth’s sea turtles until we establish contact with my mom and her people on Unit #2. Not that I’m refusing to face reality or anything...*

“Sir... Sir?” Clare called out to me.

I was watching a scene showing the sea turtles returning to the sea. A significant amount of time must have gone by.

Clare began reporting the current situation to me when I looked up to face her.

“At present, *Unit #2* is further ahead than expected. They have therefore instructed *Unit #1* to begin the operation. *Unit #1 Alice* is currently ready to launch. I believe we are to head toward the Merkava Kingdom. Do you approve?”

“Yes...”

Having gotten my approval, Clare relayed the same order to the captain.

I don't get what's going on, so all I can say is “yes,” “no,” or “I'll leave it to you.” Clare is making the decisions for me... Oh, now I get it! Clare's here to back me up since I'm just a figure-head. I finally understood why I was sitting in the admiral's chair. In that case, Clare will put me right if I give out any dumb instructions. I'll try answering with more confidence next time she asks me something.

The captain was preparing to launch. “Prepare to launch! Dis-engage optical camouflage and start all engines.”

“Engines starting. Nuclear reactor output is stable at 35 percent. Suits deployed to defensive positions are being recalled and anchored... All suits recovered. We are ready to depart.”

“All right. *Alice*, launch now!”

Whoa! This is awesome. It's like something from an anime I saw in my past life.

The captain noticed me leaning forward with excitement.

“Sir,” he said, looking at his stopwatch. “It takes us 98 seconds to launch from a state with all engines fully stopped. Is this satisfactory?”

I had no idea how quick that was, but I guessed it was praiseworthy because the captain spoke with a smile. I responded with some vague praise. “I think it’s fantastic. Everyone is so well-trained.” I looked over at Clare, and she nodded to me with a smile.

After about an hour of sitting and drinking coffee, a member of CIC personnel had something to report: “Captain! The kingdom has positioned a team of knights in front of the fortress. They number approximately 8,000. I’m enlarging the image.”

This initially came as a surprise, but I relaxed once I saw the enlarged image. *Oh, they’re just honor guards awaiting our arrival.*

“Sir, how should we proceed?” Clare asked.

I’ve totally got this! I’ve been hesitant every time she’s asked me what to do. But not this time. I saw this one coming. I know just how to greet the host’s honor guards during diplomatic ceremonies.

If Macho Man could use Earth’s manners and customs to deal with Crovence, it was likely that other Earth customs would also work.

Let’s see... a warship from the other nation is supposed to fire a 21-gun salute when the honor guards are lined up like that. We’ve got to show them that none of our cannons contain active rounds so they know that we’re not here to wage war.

“Clare, aim our main cannons into the sky and fire four consecutive salvos. Please use blank shells.”

The *Alice* had two sets of three 26-centimeter cannons, so four consecutive salvos would be 24 shots. That was three too many, but I didn't think it would matter.

"Y-Yes, sir," she stuttered. "Blank shells. Captain! Fire four consecutive salvos from our main cannons into the sky. Use blank shells."

Well, Clare didn't argue, so that must have been the right call.

Thinking about how I'd just shown off my knowledge to a beautiful girl made me grin as I watched over the work of the CIC personnel.

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Captain Dylan's, of Land Battleship *Alice*, Point of View

It had been fifteen days since the original crew of the *Tolstoy* gathered on Noa Island. The human resources department assigned me the role of captain of this ship—the Alice-type land battleship, *Unit #1 Alice*.

At first, I suspected it was no more than a massive tank with the exaggerated name of land battleship, but my expectations had been high anyway because I was told this was a weapon designed by Kouki.

Due to its size, the *Alice* had been transferred to the newly constructed frontline base on the continent, rather than to Noa Island. I was astonished when I first saw it. The *Alice* was roughly the same size as the flagship of a carrier strike group, and it looked just how you'd expect a battleship designed to travel on land would look. Having only ever been aboard nuclear submarines, I told Mrs. Arakawa that I wasn't a worthy captain for the *Alice*, but she laughed and disagreed.

"I expect that Kouki will be aboard *Unit #1*. It will take a high level of skill to operate the ship, and I believe the only people capable of this are you and your crew. You all have experience operating a state-of-the-art nuclear-powered attack submarine. I did consider my husband for the role, but in the end, I decided you're the most appropriate person." And with that, Mrs. Arakawa finished speaking and bowed to me.

I was overcome with emotion and lost for words. On Earth, nuclear-powered attack submarines had virtually become useless baggage following advancements in missile defense technology and the abandonment of all forms of nuclear weapons. And yet, Mrs. Arakawa came to me to ask that I serve as captain. Having Kouki aboard my ship was an even greater honor.

I gave the only reply I could. “I would be honored to serve as captain. I’ll give it my all.”

Today we set out with Kouki aboard for the first time, but now Kouki—that is, the major general—had little more to say than, “I’ll leave it to you.”

Ordinarily, my crew and I would have objected to this apathetic attitude, but we remained cooperative because the major general had aided us during the rescue operation.

“Captain! Have *Unit #1 Alice* launch and head for the Merkava Kingdom,” instructed his adjutant, Lieutenant Colonel Clare.

I did as instructed and made preparations to launch the *Alice*. I measured the time until launch on my stopwatch and found that it took just 98 seconds. It was a good result. In previous attempts, it had taken more than 120 seconds, so I was satisfied with our current speed.

Before resetting my stopwatch, I reported the result of 98 seconds to the major general.

“I think it’s fantastic,” he said. “Everyone is so well-trained.”

The major general smiled in satisfaction and praised us for the result. There were also many smiles amongst the CIC personnel. We trained hard to avoid embarrassing ourselves, and now it was paying off! I watched the major general ask for another coffee, and then I resumed my duties as captain.

We passed approximately an hour uneventfully before the fortress came into view ahead. A crew member monitoring for enemy activity focused one of the ship’s cameras on the fortress and zoomed in. He turned pale at what he saw.

“Captain! The kingdom has deployed a team of knights in

front of the fortress. They number approximately 8,000. I'm enlarging the image."

The formation of knights deployed by the kingdom was clear to see. I studied ancient history out of interest in my younger days, and recognized this formation as the Roman legion formation used by the Roman army.

The kingdom had prepared themselves for a battle. It seemed wise to withdraw and report the situation to the unit behind us. Before I could ask the major general for his opinion, a member of my crew stopped me.

"Captain, the kingdom appears to be using ceremonial equipment. It's hard to say whether they have any intention of fighting. If we withdraw, there'll be political implications."

Hm. This is a dilemma.

If we were to withdraw, we'd be yielding to the kingdom's forces, but meeting them head-on could incite them to attack us.

We'll have to leave this to the major general's judgment, I thought, looking over at the admiral's chair where he was sitting. He gave his instructions to the Lieutenant Colonel with unexpected swiftness.

"Clare, aim our main cannons into the sky and fire four consecutive salvos. Please use blank shells."

"Y-Yes, sir. Blank shells. Captain! Fire four consecutive salvos from our main cannons into the sky. Use blank shells."

He can't be serious! We're firing warning shots?! If things went wrong, the kingdom could immediately become hostile.

I was about to reconfirm the order before firing, but I stopped.

The major general was grinning as though he was enjoying this.

Now I see...

The Lieutenant Colonel hesitated to give the order to fire warning shots, but as long as the major general refrained from blowing the enemy away with high explosives, she wasn't going to put a stop to it.

I shouted my orders to the officer managing the cannons. "Prepare to fire four consecutive salvos from the main cannons! Use blank shells."

"Anchoring the ship in place... We are anchored! Confirming that accompanying vehicles have withdrawn from the danger zone. Target is set to 40 degrees over port side. We are ready to fire."

"Fire!!"

Boom... Boom...

Although we fired blank shells, there was an incredible shock that shook the hull after we started firing. Alice-types were relatively light considering their size; if the hull hadn't been anchored to the ground before firing, the recoil would have lifted us off the ground. This made it impossible for us to fire while advancing, but 40 vertical launch systems installed to the rear made up for this deficiency. There was also a secret weapon to be used if the main cannons and the vertical launch systems both became inoperable, but we wouldn't have to resort to that here.

"All salvos fired. The front of the fortress is displayed on the main screen."

The screen showed that the knights deployed by the kingdom had broken ranks and begun to withdraw.

“Major General, how shall we proceed?” I asked.

The major general gave his orders while still smiling the same smile. “Have some of our powered suits go out and get permission to enter the fortress.”

“How should we explain our firing of the main cannons?” I asked.

We’d have to explain why we fired warning shots at the kingdom. *Does he intend to use gunboat diplomacy to move things forward?* I wondered as I waited for his reply.

With a grin, he responded, “Tell them I said, ‘Your honor guards were most impressive. We have returned the gesture with a 21-gun salute.’”

I see... We’re passing it off as a diplomatic ceremony. The major general has a keen grasp of political matters.

**

Adrienne's Point of View

After the messenger left, the idiot nobles declared they would place a formation of knights in front of the fortress before Crovence and I could stop them.

I pleaded with them, "Please don't anger Noa!" but only the Platinum Knights and the Iron Knights had seen Noa; the other knights mocked us as cowards.

The different groups of knights were close to fighting each other, so His Majesty reluctantly allowed some knights to be deployed in front of the fortress.

Crovence came over to speak with me before we left the fortress. "We can hold back Noa if things go badly. Please use that opportunity to escape from the fortress with His Majesty. I'm certain we cannot win... but please escape to the capital."

I watched as Crovence left. His spirits were low because he understood the hopelessness of the situation.

Sometime later, a lookout using a magic tool to see far ahead cried out, "In front of the fortress... a mountain is coming!"

A mountain? What does he mean? My question was immediately answered as I caught sight of the gigantic thing that was heading toward the fortress.

"What in the world?" I asked.

A general named Auguste answered my question with a trembling voice. "In the northern Empire there is a weapon known as a cannon that fires round balls over long distances. Only once have I seen these things firsthand, but those things attached to this mountain and iron box are remarkably similar to those can-

nons. Though these are on an entirely different scale... Even an ordinary cannon is a weapon with fearsome power.”

“If they were to use such a weapon, what would become of our knights?”

“They would be obliterated by a single shot.”

I should have done more to stop those knights from going out there.

Auguste realized what I was thinking and grabbed me before I could go out to bring the knights back in. “Princess! I’m sorry, but you must accept our situation. There is movement on the mountain.”

The moment Auguste spoke the words—*boom... boom...*—there was a sound many times louder than thunder. The sound rang out loud enough to make my entire body, still held in Auguste’s arms, shake. I watched as the entire mountain became covered in flames with each burst of sound. It was as though the god of the mountain was roaring in rage at the sight of the knights.

“I’ve made the wrong decision...” said my older sister Cassis with regret. “We should have greeted them with humility.”

Noa had no interest in diplomacy from the outset. They are probably starting their full-scale assault on this kingdom this very day. I sighed as I watched the knights, who had not even been attacked directly, break ranks and withdraw into the fortress.

“Something is approaching us from the vicinity of the mountain!” the lookout suddenly cried.

Must I stand by and watch the massacre of our knights?

But the scene didn't play out like I was imagining. Instead, Noa's forces stopped just before the knights, made the same gesture of surrender that I'd seen before, and then slowly approached the knights.

"Could they be handing over a formal declaration of war?" Cassis asked. She looked confused as she watched the soldiers approach them.

One of the knights then came running toward the fortress. Fearing there might be danger, my sister and I asked His Majesty to wait inside the fortress while we headed out to the plaza.

"Noa is requesting permission to enter the fortress," the knight informed us.

"Permission? They won't invade the fortress?" Cassis asked skeptically.

I had the same doubts. *They aren't requesting our surrender?*

"They've asked for your permission. Apparently, their attack just now wasn't an attack. It was a gesture of appreciation that they call a '21-gun salute,' fired for our honor guard."

Appreciation...? I thought, dumbfounded. I know sarcasm when I hear it. I think the message is clear: "Allow us into the fortress immediately, and we'll overlook what just happened. Refuse, and we will attack."

Now that an opportunity to negotiate had been presented to us, it seemed best to give them permission immediately.

Cassis must have reached the same conclusion.

"They have our permission," she told the messenger. "Tell them that we are preparing tea in preparation for their arrival."

“How many people are permitted to enter the fortress?”

How stupid can this messenger be?

Cassis responded to him calmly before I could express my anger. “Tell them that they may bring as many armed soldiers as they please.”

The dissatisfied-looking messenger returned to the front line to deliver our instructions.

This is for the best.

My sister and I called His Majesty to the plaza so he could welcome Noa.

**

A short while later, I was informed that a party of two hundred from Noa had appeared before the fortress. In the center of the party stood the demonic armor, from which Kouki emerged to greet us.

“Long time no see, Adrienne. I’m meeting some of you for the first time, so allow me to reintroduce myself. I’m Kouki Arakawa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I am King Carlos of the Holy Merkava Kingdom.”

“I am Cassis, first princess of the Holy Merkava Kingdom,” my sister said.

I was not surprised to hear Cassis introduce herself so politely, but I hadn’t expected His Majesty to speak in such a way. Clearly, His Majesty understood that our lives were at stake. He was paying Kouki as much respect as possible.

With the greetings finished, I informed them that tea had been served and tried to guide them inside, but Kouki stopped me.

“Please wait. I’m sorry, but our advanced party is very tired. With your approval, I’d like to allow some of my people to rest outside of the fortress. Would this be acceptable?”

“Of course. Please do as you wish,” His Majesty replied.

Kouki gave some sort of instruction to the girl beside him. The girl waved her arm, and members of Noa that had been deployed in front of the fortress began to move as if intending to encircle us.

I know he said to do as you wish, but he didn’t say he wanted you to surround the fortress!

“Let’s go,” Kouki said, seeming pleased with this situation. He asked us to guide him inside and we each entered the fortress in a cold sweat.

“Master Kouki, what is that mountain-like structure?” his Majesty asked Kouki while the maid was pouring the tea.

“Mountain? Oh, that’s a battleship that can travel across land. Just think of it as a ship with large cannons that can move freely. I brought it with me because I’m a little scared of those worms we saw last time. Haha...”

Don’t lie to us! “Scared”? You defeated those A-class monsters in seconds. Besides dragons and Fenrir, there isn’t a monster stronger than a sandworm.

“That thing is named *Alice*, by the way. It’s named after my girlfriend.”

“W-What a perfect name for something so elegant and awe in-

spiring! Miss Alice must be quite beautiful.” His Majesty’s eyes darted around as he struggled to respond appropriately.

I can’t believe anyone would be insensitive enough to name a weapon after their lover. If I were her, I would not stand for it.

His Majesty continued to ask questions, but Kouki’s disingenuous responses made me wish I was back in the royal castle.

I expected this entire exchange would prove fruitless, but then a woman standing beside Kouki whispered something into his ear. Kouki nodded several times.

“The main unit has arrived earlier than I expected,” Kouki said to us with a stern face. “I know this is rather sudden, but our head negotiator has arrived, so I expect you’d like to start the diplomatic discussions.”

I expected this to take place tomorrow. Now we would have to begin a fight, fought without weapons, for the survival of our kingdom.

**

Cassis's Point of View

I was preparing to welcome the diplomat from Noa into the fortress when my father, the king, spoke to me.

“Cassis, I’ll leave the negotiations to you. Please negotiate as you see best for this kingdom. I can tolerate our nation becoming the most pitiful vassal state if that’s what it takes for the name Merkava to live on. I believe in you.”

“I will do my best.”

Father was neither incompetent nor exceptional as a king. If the peace lasted, he was the sort who would have lived out his life as an unremarkable ruler. But times had changed for the worse. We lived in fear of attack by the demon lord’s forces, and were bordered by rapidly developing nations to the north and east.

“I’d also like you to talk about the assembly of allied nations,” he said.

“Yes, Father.”

I had almost forgotten. I would need to make Noa promise that they’d attend those headache-inducing meetings. I felt overwhelmed by these two great responsibilities, and it was difficult not to succumb to despair. Just as I finished setting up the meeting area, the diplomats from Noa entered the room with accompanying guards.

“It’s nice to meet you,” one of them said. “I am Miki Arakawa, a representative of Noa.”

Arakawa?! Based on her appearance, I guessed she was the mother of the boy Kouki. Could it be that the queen herself is attending the negotiations? Well, that would explain why they

brought so many soldiers.

“I’m Clare Dauntless, a political negotiator,” another one said.

“Elise Dauntless, also a political negotiator.”

“I’m Roberta Scarlet, their secretary.”

I studied the four diplomats as they introduced themselves. They were wearing similar clothing to the boy, but with skirts and in black. They looked intimidating, but what bothered me was the large bag held by a guard behind the diplomats.

Whatever could be in that thing?

“I have a request to make,” Miki said. “Please don’t use the translation magic on Roberta here. I’ll need her to remember what words everyone used for later.”

“I understand.”

I excluded the woman from the area of the translation magic. The woman named Elise then acted as interpreter.

How could she be capable of remembering words in a language so different from her own? I wondered.

I was about to begin the negotiations, but then Miki started the negotiations herself. “First, I’d like you to look at this. This is a map that we made ourselves. The island and the part of the continent marked in red are the territory of the Merkava Kingdom, correct?”

“This is correct.”

I lost my nerve at the sight of the map. It was so intricate that it was as though the continent itself had been cut out of the

ground and I was now looking down on it from high above.

This won't do... I can't let my feelings show on my face...

“This marking is where we’ve constructed an outpost. At present, we’re illegally occupying territory belonging to the Merkava Kingdom. We’d like to begin by offering you compensation.”

Miki snapped her fingers and the guard standing behind her removed something from inside the large bag. There was a great clanging sound as he placed a gigantic gold block on the table. One of the diplomats then upturned another bag over the table. Diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and other precious stones spilled out in great number. The high value and purity of the stones was apparent from the way they glittered.

“This gold bar weighs 10 kilograms. That’s a unit we use to measure weight. As compensation we’ll give you 500 kilograms, which is equivalent to 50 such bars. Our offer comes without any conditions. If gold has no value to your kingdom, we’d like to offer you an equivalent amount of another precious stone of your choosing.”

I couldn’t understand what they were thinking. *Do they expect to claim this back later?*

“I’d like to apologize for bringing an excessively large delegation with me,” she added. “We didn’t intend to create any misunderstandings. We’ve no intention of using our military might to impose unfair conditions such as making your kingdom our vassal. We want only one thing: To coexist with your nation as equals.”

“You must forgive me, but I find that difficult to believe.”

“That’s understandable,” she said. “Let me begin by explaining our history. It’s a long story, but please listen to the whole thing.”

With that, she began explaining the history of Noa. What she told me was astounding.

“Noa” was not actually a nation. They were something like a guild. What surprised me most was that they had migrated to our world from another.

A certain child had been born in that world 15 years earlier. The name of the child was Kouki Arakawa—the boy wearing the white military uniform. Soon after his birth, he displayed an unusual level of intellect, and by the age of three, he shocked his mother by constructing a theory relating to an important magic number. The technology of that world had been moved ahead by more than 50 years by the power of a single person’s mind.

Rather than accepting this gift with great gratitude, their world had come to see Kouki as dangerous, as if they could not accept him. Even though the boy himself was a gentle child with love for nature and animals, his world branded him a demon child.

A number of good people decided to repay him for what he had given them. But they knew a direct war would make him sad, so that was out of the question. So they thought, why not remove him from the world that hated him? It sounded like a fairy tale, but they approached the task with earnest intent, and succeeded. This meant finding another world that they could migrate to while gathering people who had a respect for the boy. It was this world that they eventually chose.

“So you truly wish to work together as equals?” I asked.

“Yes. But there is one warning I must give you. Under no circumstances should my son Kouki be unnecessarily... provoked. As his mother, it’s embarrassing for me to say this, but the boy’s

sense of ethics have been a problem. It's the result of him being mistreated by our world. It's difficult for me to say, but if my son were provoked, he would be capable of laying waste to a nation on the scale of the Merkava Kingdom within half a day."

I think the story of Noa's history may have been slightly inaccurate. To me, it sounds as though Noa's inability to remain in the other world was roughly 30 percent Kouki's own fault.

Rather than dwelling on this, I composed myself and resumed our talks in hope of reaching a fair agreement with Noa.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

After returning to the Alice-type Ground Warship *Unit #2 Clare*, I slumped into the admiral's chair.

I'll never get used to wearing this uniform.

"Welcome back," Shuuichi said to me. "How'd the negotiation go?"

"It went all right. We haven't dealt with the finer details yet, but we've signed a provisional agreement for now. Noa Island, a limited lease on the continent, and a guarantee of their national sovereignty were all included in the pact, so there was no problem signing it. But another awkward problem came up."

"Which is?"

"Attending the assembly of allied nations."

"What's one of those?" Shuuichi asked.

According to what the kingdom told us, it seemed to be an organization made up of armed forces of five nations from this continent that were preparing for war against the demon lord's forces. The Merkava Kingdom was much weaker than the other four nations and was basically taking orders from them.

They bowed to me and pleaded, "Please! Attend the assembly!"

I hadn't been able to refuse after Cassis begged me, almost in tears. It sounded like trouble and I was seriously thinking I might not go along, but then my beloved husband spoke my biggest fear aloud.

“If you don’t go, you know Kouki’s going to say something like, ‘I hate Mom because she doesn’t keep her promises!’”

That really worried me. I wouldn’t be able to go on living if he hated me.

“That reminds me,” I said dreamily. “I was having lunch with Kouki recently, and he was telling me, ‘Mom is so good at her job; she’s amazing. I think I might call the third unit Miki.’”

I must attend this assembly of allies for the sake of friendship between our nations! This might actually be a great chance to make contact with other nations, too. I should at least greet their officials.

“By the way, where exactly is this assembly of allied nations thing?” Shuuichi asked.

“It’s happening in the royal castle. There’s a magic item in the conference room that allows them to talk to people far away.”

“Something like a video call device, I imagine.”

Shuuichi had no more to say, so I let him go and started thinking of other things. Roberta was on my mind. Ever since reaching Noa Island she’d done nothing but eat, and yet she was fluently speaking the kingdom’s language by the time the meeting finished.

She said, “Once you’ve memorized the vocabulary, it’s simple.” But I knew this was impossible for any ordinary person. The rate at which she learned languages was fearsome, just as Kouki said. I only wished she’d refrain from consuming enough food for fifteen soldiers within a single day.

I also had to think about the demon lord’s forces.

It might require all five allied forces to work together, but why can't they combine their military power to launch an attack against this one nation? I wondered. I remembered how they acted as if they were entirely reluctant to enter into a war. And it seemed unnatural that the kingdom had taken time to create elaborately disguised defense installations. *Could something be going on between two of these nations?*

I thought deeply about the current situation, and before I knew it, night had fallen.

**

Two days later, we arrived at the capital after a slow journey at a pace set by the kingdom. Once we arrived, we were soon guided into the royal castle. The furnishings inside the castle were modest, and my initial impressions were favorable.

We stopped before entering the conference room so that Cassis could explain the situation. For some reason she couldn't seem to meet my eyes. "I'm sorry about this," she said. "The representatives of the allied nations are already waiting in their respective conference rooms. I realize how troublesome this is, but please..."

She must be under pressure because they're all waiting for me, I realized.

"It's no trouble at all," I said with a smile before taking a seat in the conference room.

Over the previous two days, Clare and I had decided that I should approach this meeting by being humble while trying to learn more about the situation. It was also important to avoid conflict as much as possible, so as not to disgrace the kingdom. As I waited for the conference to start, the mirror in front of me became blurred and changed to display four men.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” I said. “I am Miki Arakawa, a representative of Noa.”

The second man from the right quickly expressed his displeasure. “They’ve sent a woman to an important meeting between nations? How uncivilized.”

Princess Cassis spoke to me through the earpiece I was wearing. “He’s a representative of the Ragille Principality.”

Next, the man furthest to the right stood up and yelled with such passion that a good amount of spit flew from his mouth. “These damnable small nations! Stand up when you greet us.”

I bowed to him while trying not to laugh at his strange way of judging people. Meanwhile he continued to yell until he was red in the face. I was told that this man was a representative of the Recule Holy State.

“Ha! There’s no use in trying to teach manners to a savage.” Furthest to the left was a man so hairy he seemed more like an ape. He was a representative of the Rinkdolfr Empire.

Lastly, I was told that the old white-haired man who hadn’t spoken yet was a representative of the Capus Kingdom.

Looks like I’ll need to change my approach here. The kind of high-level political talk I used with Princess Cassis isn’t going to work with these idiots.

I spoke bluntly to the four men. “I’m told this is the assembly of allied nations. Will your nations be hoping to establish diplomatic relations with Noa?”

There was silence after I’d spoken, but they understood the meaning. As I expected, the representative of the Recule Holy State became so enraged that I worried he might burst a blood

vessel.

“Don’t play games with us! You know you need us to keep you safe from the demon lord!”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said. “We’ve already demonstrated our ability to eliminate A-class monsters without trouble. And we have no intention of engaging in combat with the demon lord. If anything, we’d like to negotiate a peace.”

After I cleared up the Recule Holy State representative’s misunderstandings, the Capus Kingdom representative spoke for the first time. “Very well. I think Noa’s position is very clear. I suppose now that the subhuman leaders of the Merkava Kingdom have formed an alliance with Noa, they no longer have any need for our alliance?”

The Capus Kingdom representative’s statement cleared up the final mystery. I’d heard from Kouki that the elven race made up most of the Merkava Kingdom. He told me they were closer to demons and spirits than humans were.

Perhaps they feel a sense of solidarity with whatever race is serving the demon lord and have no real desire to fight. That would explain why they’ve no desire to fight the demon lord and are using elaborate delay tactics. What is the kingdom really trying to accomplish? Depending on the answer to that question, we could find ourselves having to make a difficult decision.

I looked over at Princess Cassis. She approached the magic item with a commanding air and stated the policy of her nation clearly.

“We, the Holy Merkava Kingdom, have formed a fair diplomatic relationship for the first time in our nation’s history. Whatever decision Noa makes, we will stand by it and follow its lead.”

“You damnable demi-humans dare defy us humans?! This will not end well for you!” the representative of the Capus Kingdom snarled.

The policy that the kingdom just laid out was being condemned harshly. It was up to me to protect the kingdom now that they declared they’d be working together with us.

The smile that I’d been wearing until now vanished.

As a representative of my nation, I declared, “I must apologize. Noa refuses to join the alliance. We have already established a diplomatic relationship with this kingdom. If any of your nations use economic sanctions or military power against the kingdom, Noa will immediately declare war against all four of your nations as per our safety assurance pact. We will use the full extent of our power to retaliate.”

The representatives of the four nations were enraged by my statement and began to disappear as they disconnected from the magic device one by one. The representative of the Capus Kingdom was the last to disconnect. “We will remember this,” he said glaring at me.

That pushed me over my limit. For the first time in long while, I became truly angry.

“We’re ready take you on any time. We are Noa! We’ll eliminate all who stand in our way!”

I felt better as soon as I’d said those words.

I was already beginning to form a plan as the mirror disconnected.



Chapter 4: The Multi-Race Coalition Force

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

Approximately one month after the Merkava Kingdom had withdrawn from the alliance, Noa Island became fully operational. Today there would be a meeting attended by staff from each department.

In my room, I skimmed over the announcement that had been sent to attendees from all departments, checked the current time, and then headed out to the conference room.

In a corridor of the military department located in the eastern building, I encountered Shuuichi, who was accompanied by the Dauntless sisters.

“Miki, are you headed to the meeting, too?” Shuuichi asked.

“That’s right.”

Is something wrong? I wondered. It seemed as though something was bothering Shuuichi.

“Isn’t Kouki with you?” he asked. “I thought he was going to attend the meeting.”

“He’s back on Earth for now. Alice and his friends will probably finish moving and arrive at the Hakone base today. Only three days passed on Earth during the time he was here on G-88. But if we let Kouki stay here too long, it will seem strange when he returns to Earth. He’s a growing boy.”

“Right. So what’s the real reason?”

My husband is as intuitive as always.

“The main purpose of this meeting is to discuss the war against the Four-Nation Alliance,” I replied with a wry smile. “What do you think Kouki would do if he saw footage of demi-human races being persecuted?”

“He’d crush the nation responsible, without a doubt...”

I won’t let him do anything like that, I thought. Not every human is persecuting other races. We just need to deal with the humans responsible. And I think I know just how to pull it off.

First, I’ll hear what progress has been made by each department at this meeting, and then I’ll make my proposal. I expect I can get everyone’s agreement.

I opened the door to the meeting room.

**

“It seems everyone is here,” Roberta said. “I’d like to begin our first briefing. Once the briefing is over, I’d like us to then continue with our anti Four-Nation Alliance strategy meeting.”

Roberta was in attendance wearing a Noa uniform and serving as the meeting’s facilitator. Ordinarily, one of the Dauntless sisters who worked for Shuuichi would have served as facilitator, but they had turned down the role because they were attending as representatives of the military department.

Roberta continued, “I’d like to have the engineering department’s magic research team start things off.”

“I’m from the magic research team,” a man said. “Since first

arriving on Noa Island, our team has been investigating the magic that exists here on G-88. Our friend, the Merkava Kingdom, has offered us the support of its magic knight division, which has enabled us to complete a preliminary analysis of the magic. Please take a look at this.”

The man from the research team brought up an image and some numeric values on a large screen.

“This is an electron microscope image showing the magic nuclei that are produced by magical energy. We’re calling these magic molecules for convenience. Magic effects are produced by taking these molecules into one’s own body.

“After a detailed investigation performed with permission from a member of the division of knights, we discovered that they have an organ behind the liver that isn’t present in humans from Earth. We hypothesize that this organ uses the magic molecules to produce magic effects. The exact mechanism is still unclear.

“By culturing cells of this organ, we’ve learned that the organ will be damaged if it stores too many of these magic molecules. This means that organisms with a low magic tolerance are unable to survive in regions where there’s a high level of magical energy. This presents no risk to people from Earth because we don’t have this organ in the first place. What’s more...”

I see... I mused. Lacking the organ means we can’t use magic, but we can function normally in places with high levels of magical energy. Experiments on humans would be needed here, but we have no doubt been limited to performing only a preliminary analysis because of ethical concerns.

“Thank you,” Roberta said. “Next, I’d like us to hear from the engineering department’s weapons development team.”

“I am from the weapons development team,” another man in-

troduced himself. “I’d like to begin by sharing some new information that isn’t included in the documents you’ve been given.

“As per Mrs. Arakawa’s request, we have finished the construction of the Alice-type land battleship, *Unit #3 Miki*. This means the construction of all Alice-type units is completed. We then began production of magic defense clothing in collaboration with the magic research team. The protective clothing we’ve produced will be provided to the Merkava Kingdom free of charge. They’ll be providing it to their knights and using it in combat.”

There’s finally a finished Alice-type named after me... I thought. I’m a little annoyed that I’m not Unit #2, but I’ll live with it. That protective clothing is going to be indispensable for the knights if they engage in combat in regions with high levels of magical energy. We should dedicate more production lines to making it.

“In addition, the secret weapon development team has completed all of their weapon development projects. The team has disbanded and been incorporated into other research teams that suit the expertise of each individual. Lastly...”

So we can use those weapons at last. I was glad to hear that an increased range of strategies were now available to us.

Once we’d heard from several other departments, someone from the medical department, which rarely made public announcements, began speaking.

“Hello, everyone. I’m from the medical department. We finished production of the, um, anti-aging drug, so we’d like to use it to treat members of each department. The drug makes it so when you pass through the gate, your body’s T particles are... On second thought, this will take too long to explain. Basically, the drug causes you to age at a rate corresponding to Earth time, so please

think of it as a good thing. That's all."

The member of the medical department seemed eager to finish talking and sit back down. Everyone listening was astounded. The speaker was the leader of the medical department. I heard that she'd been working for five days and nights without sleep to produce this anti-aging drug.

It would be mandatory for all Noa personnel to be treated with the anti-aging drug. However, anyone who married an inhabitant of this world and wished to live an ordinary life would be given another drug to counteract the effects.

"Lastly, we have a speaker from the political department's unification team," Roberta said.

"I'm from the political team," said a fourth man. "After some discussion with the kingdom, we've been given permission to use the Merkava Kingdom's national flag and the crest of the royal family both within the kingdom's territory and in other nations. We're also taking part in the kingdom's efforts to keep public order in some regions. As a result, we've built new bases in five places within the kingdom. With the cooperation of their knights..."

Three hours after the start of the briefing, announcements from other departments were still going on.

I imagined that Kouki was probably back on Earth eating with Alice and his friends right now. I decided to give my mind a rest.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After passing through the gate with Kon, I found that it was about lunchtime on Earth.

I spent some time wandering around the base searching for Alice before finding Baldy, who had some bad news for me.

“Alice and your friends have gone shopping with their security personnel,” he said before walking off.

I suddenly had nothing to do and needed a way to kill time. *Maybe I should just take a nap*, I thought.

“Hey, Kon, what should we do?” I asked.

“Konn.”

Kon made a sound as he lay in my arms, but his tail was swaying listlessly as if he didn't have any good ideas either.

On my way back to the gate, I remembered his special ability.

Kon has that mysterious ability that can create minerals... I wonder if he can create minerals from legends. I ran back to my room and began searching through a pile of books.

“Not this one... Not this... Here it is! This is it.”

It was a worn-out paper-based book printed over 80 years ago. Such books were rare these days. I opened the book and showed it to Kon.

“Kon, can you make orichalcum?”

Kon got closer as if to say, “Let me get a good look at it.” He sat

in front of the book and his tail flickered back and forth as if he was thinking hard.

Finally, he pulled out a pen and paper from the communication tools hanging around his neck and began writing. “Hmm. Probably. If I had minerals from a region with a high magical energy in G-88, I could probably pull it off.”

“So you can do it if we go to G-88,” I mused. “I want it so bad... I want some orichalcum! If I collect some orichalcum, I can get a blacksmith in the kingdom to forge me a sword out of it!”

“We can’t do that!” Kon retorted in writing. “It’s out of the question. Regions with high magical energy levels are full of dangerous monsters. It’s too dangerous. I’ll tell your mother.”

Kon whipped his tail against my leg as he held up the paper with his written thoughts in his mouth.

“I don’t see a problem,” I said. “I can fly there in my suit, recover the minerals, and quickly get out of there. It’s no big deal.”

I’d gotten the hang of shotguns in weapons training recently. Getting out of my suit to collect the minerals wouldn’t be a problem.

But Kon began writing frantically when I tried to argue with him. “I said no! Master, why must you act without thinking about the consequences first?! No good can come of this. I’m completely against it.”

Damn... He’s pretty strict, considering he’s my pet. I need to get Kon on my side. It’s no good recovering minerals if he won’t convert them to orichalcum for me. There has to be a way.

I remembered that Kon had made gold for Mom in exchange for tomatoes.

“What if I give you three boxes of tomatoes and one box of cabbages, all organic? I’ll even throw in some high-quality apples grown in Aomori.”

“Kon?!”

Kon’s tail swayed back and forth as he thought it over. Finally, he began to write slowly. “Just this once. But only on one condition. Whatever happens, wear as much heavy armor as you can.”

Heavy armor is easy enough to get hold of, I thought gleefully. My suit is already designed to withstand explosions, and Cote should be guarding the weapons store today. I’m sure he’ll let me borrow something.

I headed through the gate and back to Noa Island with a spring in my step.

**

“Cote, can you give me permission to borrow a gun and take some powered suit weapons from the armory?” I asked.

“Do you have an authorization form?”

Cote stood in front of the armory. He was smiling and asking to see an authorization form. I gave him the authorization form that Macho Man had given me for the sake of weapons training. Cote entered the document number into his terminal to confirm its validity.

“A gas-powered shotgun and 30 training rounds as always, right? Do you want to fetch them yourself?”

“The thing is, they’re not on the form, but I’d also like to take some live ammunition and weapons for my suit. I’m heading over to the capital for a while. The roads aren’t very safe.”

Cote looked at me suspiciously. “If you’re leaving Noa Island, then I can let you take live ammunition. But do you have permission to leave?”

There’s no way I could get permission! I’m pretty sure I made Mom mad by waiting until the last unit before naming a land battleship “Miki.”

As much as it pained me to do so, I decided to lie for the sake of getting the orichalcum. “I sort of do have permission, but Mom is in a meeting, so she can’t sign my authorization form yet. You can check with her if you like... though you’d have to be pretty brave to call my mom while she’s in a meeting.”

“That would take a braver man than me,” he agreed. “Okay, fine. I’ll unlock the storage areas for suit weapons and live ammunition. Go take whatever you need. Don’t forget to record which weapons you’ve taken on the terminal.”

Now that I’d gotten past Cote, I entered the armory and began looking for weapons.

I’ll definitely need a spare fuel pack, I decided. And I’d better take some rail gun rounds and a rear-fitted missile launcher.

I spent about thirty minutes choosing my weapons and then headed for the control office of the departure area where my suit was stored to ask them to prepare my suit.

“Excuse me, could I get permission to launch my suit?” I said. “I’ve got permission to go outside, but my authorization form is...”

I got launching permission for my suit by giving the controller the same excuse I’d given Cote. In the changing room, I put on a reinforced exoskeleton that included a feature for translating the Elven language, made with Ms. Roberta’s help. As I was chang-

ing, I explained my plan to Kon.

“I really will head toward the capital at first, but once I’m 100 kilometers away from Noa Island, I’ll fly straight up to an altitude of 20,000 meters and fly at high altitude. Then we’ll head in whichever direction you feel the strongest magical energy from so we can collect rocks containing magic energy. We’ll come back the same way, convert the stones into orichalcum, and then hand it over to a blacksmith in the capital! We’ll need some gold to pay the blacksmith, so I’ll need you to transform some ordinary stones, too.”

“Kon!” replied Kon with his chest puffed out as if to say, “Leave it to me!”

Now that I had Kon’s approval, I equipped my suit, which had been prepared for me, then I asked for permission to launch.

“This is ground control,” the answer came. “Identification number OF-7-001; suit user, Kouki Arakawa. Confirmation complete. Preparing for launch... Abort procedure immediately! We have an order to abort the launch from base commander, Miki Arakawa. Please disengage your suit immediately and report to the control center.”

They’re on to me. Mom must have found out. Cote must have gotten suspicious and checked with her. I wasted all that time equipping my suit and all of the weapons... Though if my suit can fly faster than the speed of sound, the aircraft here on Noa Island won’t be able to follow me... Sorry, Mom! Your son is at that rebellious age!

I responded to the controller, “This is OF-7-001. I can’t hear you very well, but I see you’ve given me the green light, so I’m launching. Thank you for your assistance.”

I knew I was already caught, so I decided to act less cautiously.

Instead of heading toward the capital initially, I flew off in a direction that Kon gave me.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

“Yes. What I’m saying is, Noa’s strategy for dealing with the Capus Kingdom...”

As I was listening to the member of the military department in attendance at the strategy meeting, Clare leaned over and whispered something to me. “Excuse me. Did you give your son authorization to leave Noa Island?”

“No, he doesn’t have permission to leave,” I replied.

Why is she asking me this? She shouldn’t even need to ask. Of course I’m not going to give Kouki permission to leave.

I watched the color drain from Clare’s face as she received a message in her earpiece. I had a bad feeling as she turned to look at me.

“Your son has been telling everyone that you gave him permission to leave, and now he’s waiting in the suit departure area. I’ll give the control center an emergency termination order in your name. Are you all right with that?”

“Y-Yes. Please do.”

Why would he tell lies just for the sake of leaving the island? It’s not as though he has no freedom here on Noa Island. I even gave him permission to receive weapons training, as much as I hate the idea. He’s always listened to me until now. Why this sudden change? I thought hard, trying to come up with a reason.

“This is an emergency!” Clare said, practically screaming at me. “Kouki ignored the order from the controller, ignited his thrusters without permission, and has left the island. Right now, he’s not heading toward the Merkava Kingdom. He’s on course

for another continent!”

“Contact him immediately and order him to return to Noa Island! If that’s not possible, use our remote control system to force him to land!”

“It’s no use! Kouki’s suit is rejecting the transmission. We have no means of contacting him. Remote control was disabled for the eighth-generation model to make it resistant against electronic warfare. It’s a complete standalone model.”

How could this happen?! Every piece of technology we’ve put in place to protect my son has backfired. I began biting my nails as my thoughts were racing. I prayed that he hadn’t shut off the position tracking device installed in his suit. *I can’t imagine that he’s planning anything as terrible as an armed rebellion. But if this isn’t a rebellion, then the question is where is he going and why?*

“This strategy meeting is over,” I announced. “My son has left Noa Island without permission. I would like all personnel from the military department and the technology department, and all communications officers to focus all their efforts on tracking Kouki.”

I need to get to the underground command center.

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I entered the command center and the staff tracking Kouki by satellite explained the situation to me.

“Kouki is currently flying at an altitude of 18,000 meters at cruising speed. He has changed course numerous times, and is currently flying toward the continent in the north.”

“You mean he’s not headed toward a region with a high popu-

lation density?”

They confirmed to me that that wasn't the case.

Thank goodness. At least we'll avoid a situation where Kouki commits atrocities against humans. It was impossible to say whether Kouki wanted something from the northern continent, or whether his actions were a diversion to disguise his true intentions.

“Almost all of the northern continent has high levels of magical energy. Though I wouldn't expect this area would be of interest to Kouki...”

So this is a diversion? I couldn't imagine what Kouki's true intention might be.

Shuuichi handed me some printed documents with a frown. “That idiot. You won't believe what he took with him.”

When I read through the list he gave me, I felt as though I might stop breathing. Kouki had armed himself with a shotgun and 50 live rounds, but the problem was how he armed his suit. I could understand why he would take a prototype 180-millimeter rail gun and a pile bunker with him, but one of the missiles loaded into the missile launcher equipped to the suit's back was carrying an incredibly powerful warhead.

“He took... an imaginary number weapon?”

There was a commotion in the command center as my words were overheard, but silence returned after just a moment.

Even Eve, of the people of Adam who we'd met on the moon, considered an imaginary number weapon to be the ultimate weapon. I was astounded to hear that he took such a weapon with him. Based on Kouki's explanation and the materials we recov-

ered from the relic, we produced a single prototype imaginary number bomb. For Kouki to be able to find it and take it with him suggested some negligence on my part.

Theoretically, if the bomb was detonated, it would create a small black hole that would completely destroy everything in a 2,000 kilometer radius.

Could it be that he's heading to a deserted area on the northern continent so he can test out that bomb?

“What should we do?” Shuuichi asked. “Kouki may have given us the slip, but it’s not too late for my unit to go after him.”

Shuuichi’s suggestion may have been a good idea, but if Kouki was to respond by activating his optical camouflage and cutting off the positioning system in his suit, we’d be completely unable to track him, so I didn’t want to resort to that yet. Time was running out, and I couldn’t think of an effective plan.

A staff member who’d been tracking Kouki suddenly announced a change in the situation. “Kouki is reducing his altitude! He is currently 300 kilometers inland on the northern continent at an altitude of 8,000 meters. He is currently descending, 4,000; 3,500; 2,000... What?! He disappeared from the satellite image at an altitude of around 1,200 meters!”

“Did he activate his optical camouflage? Tell me he didn’t crash land!”

“We can’t be sure, but his optical camouflage doesn’t seem to have been activated. A crash landing seems unlikely, though. His suit’s positioning system is still working normally. We are currently attempting to determine the cause of his disappearance.”

I prayed that we’d determine what happened quickly. For now, all I could do was watch over positioning data and life signs from

Kouki’s suit displayed on the screen.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

While flying in the direction that Kon had given me, I spotted a creature that looked like a giant octopus swimming in the sea and focused my suit's camera on it. The sight of it slowly moving across the sea's surface was fascinating. Then I saw an even bigger creature that looked like a jellyfish attack the octopus in an attempt to eat it.

"Awesome! Kon, look at this. There's an octopus fighting a jellyfish."

"Kon, Konn." Kon began to swish his tail violently as if he was excited, too.

I began descending to a lower altitude so we could get a better look, but I soon gave up on the idea because the air resistance at low altitude was causing excessive fuel consumption.

After the jellyfish was out of sight, I realized a light was blinking on my communications device. I guessed it was a message from Mom. I was sure she'd just tell me to come back if I answered. I ignored it as I drank water from a tube above my knee.

"We're about to enter the northern continent. Is this right?" I asked Kon. "Can you feel strong magical energy here?"

"Kon!"

Kon skillfully used his tail to point to a location on the radar screen.

Hm... It's right on the edge of how far we can go. If we hand the orichalcum to a blacksmith in the capital, we'll have to walk back normally rather than flying. Then we'd have to get more fuel from a Noa outpost along the way. Forget it! Let's just get

the orichalcum, then even if I get punished by being confined to Earth, I can have Cote take it to the blacksmith for me.

“All right,” I said. “We’re above the target, so I’m going to descend. In just a moment, I’ll disengage the safety on the weapons.”

I pet Kon, who was clinging on to the neck of my reinforced exoskeleton, and then I gradually began to descend. At an altitude of 8,000 meters, I released the safety of the weapons so we’d be ready for any surprise attack. As we were descending, I felt the strangest sensation.

“It feels like something’s wrong. Do you feel that?”

“Kon...” Kon looked unwell as if he felt the same sensation.

I checked the altimeter and found that we were at an altitude of 1,000 meters. I reckoned that we must have felt the sensation at around 1,200 meters.

Maybe it was just my imagination?

I wanted to ascend again to check, but I was worried about how much fuel we had left. As far as I could tell, it hadn’t affected me or my suit, so I continued to descend. I slowly flew toward our destination at an altitude of 200 meters. There was something like a garden up ahead.

Kon began making noises while gesturing with his tail, so I felt sure that the garden was our destination.

“All right, all right. I’m going there, so stay quiet! Don’t shriek in my ear.”

Kon looked as though his feelings were hurt, but I ignored him and landed my suit in the garden. I shut off the thrusters and

took a look around. Everything seemed okay. I loaded the shotgun that was beside my seat and got ready to get out of the suit.

Kon held up a piece of paper in his mouth. “Don’t remove your reinforced exoskeleton, no matter what happens. Keep the gun’s safety off and be ready to fire it. If you have to fire, stay calm and aim at the center of the body, just like in training. You’re not particularly skilled with a gun, so if you aim for the head, you might miss.”

Kon’s so annoying sometimes. I wish he wouldn’t criticize me in writing like that. My skill level was so low that Macho Man had recommended I always use a shotgun to make sure I’d actually hit when firing. I didn’t know how Kon knew this; he hadn’t been there at the time.

I silently nodded, picked up the shotgun, and opened the cockpit door. “If I collect rocks from here, you can turn them into orichalcum?”

“Kon... Kon! Konkon!”

Once outside, I asked Kon which rocks we should collect. He used his tail to point to some rocks a short distance away. As we headed toward them, I collected a few other rocks that looked like nothing I’d ever seen before.

“What brings you to a place like this?”

I was surprised to hear a voice from behind me. I turned around with the shotgun ready. I saw a beautiful woman with two horns growing out of her head. She began to approach while looking at me curiously.

She was wearing clothes and seemed alert, so I guessed she was intelligent.

I lowered the gun and spoke to her using the translation device installed in my exoskeleton. “Hello.”

“Oh, you speak Elven. You’re an elf, then?”

This is a problem... I can't understand anything she's saying.
I got a little frightened and raised the gun again. *If she continues to approach, I'm going to fire a warning shot and run!*

I was looking for the right timing to make my escape, but then Kon, who’d been biting rocks to test their strength, roared for the first time in a long while.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAW! Gruuuu... GRAAAW!”

“V-Very well,” the woman said in the language I didn’t know.
“V-Very well. I’ll use translation magic, if that’s your wish!”

Suddenly, I was able to understand what the woman was saying. She must have used the translation magic. I was relieved to be able to talk to her. I started by asking who she was.

“Me? My...”

“GRAAAW! Gruu.”

“Eek?! Very well. I shan’t approach any closer! Young elf, can’t you do something about this white dragon? It says it intends to kill and eat me.”

Kon was standing beside me acting threatening toward the woman. I picked him up and threw him toward the suit’s cockpit. I watched Kon fly in an arc before disappearing into it. Then I tried asking my question again.

“I’m terribly sorry about him. Could I ask once more who you are?”

“My name is Victoria. I am the last survivor of the proud Loa race.”

Loa... I think Loa are some kind of high-ranking spiritual being. That means this woman in front of me... Victoria... must be a pretty big deal.

It was exciting to meet someone from a race besides the elves that really did seem like something from another world.

“So how exactly did you find your way here? More to the point, how is an elf such as yourself able to survive on this continent? You should have died after being overwhelmed by magical energy.”

Where do I start? I wondered. First of all, Victoria thinks I'm an elf, but it's difficult to explain myself.

As I thought hard about it, Kon stuck his head out from the cockpit and growled. He kept the volume to a lower level than previously. “Graw, gruuu.”

“Hm?” Victoria said. “You’re quite right. This is no place to entertain guests. Let me escort you back to the castle.”

Victoria seemed to be able to talk to Kon. Kon said something to her, and now she turned her back and began walking away as if she wanted me to follow. I picked up Kon and asked him what he’d said to her. He wrote on a piece of paper and showed it to me.

“She can understand me, so I asked her to make some tea. I asked for a type that elves can drink, so you’ll be able to drink it, too.”

Why did you go and say that without checking with me first?! Things were going great, but if you’ve made her angry, it’ll all

be for nothing.

After insisting to Kon that he shouldn't be so demanding in future, I followed after Victoria.

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After entering the castle, we found ourselves in a wide-open space similar a cathedral. There were paintings on the ceiling and stained glass telling a story that unfolded as we progressed further inside. I followed behind Victoria and she guided us to a terrace where we could see the garden.

“Please take a seat,” she said. “The maid will bring tea.”

After a short wait, a maid whose entire body seemed to be cloaked in cold air entered the room carrying tea.

What’s up with her? I wonder if she’s an ice spirit or something similar.

“Let’s continue our discussion,” Victoria said. “How did you find your way into the garden?”

“Well, I flew in from the sky. Hey! Don’t look at me like that! I’ll explain everything. For starters, I’m not actually an elf. I’m...”

I explained to Victoria how we’ve gotten into the garden while drinking the tea, which seemed to be raspberry flavored. I told her that I wasn’t originally from this world, that I came here because there was no longer a place for me in my own world, that we established diplomatic relations with the Merkava Kingdom, and that I’d left Noa Island because I wanted orichalcum. Then we began talking about Earth.

I explained everything, although sometimes the nuance seemed to be lost as a result of the two-way translation. Victoria listened to my story while smiling and sometimes looking angry.

“That truly is an interesting tale. Do the people of your world hold no prejudice against nonhuman races?” she asked me, sounding serious.

I explained my viewpoint to her. “Personally, I won’t consider anyone an enemy if there’s a way for us to communicate. Even if we can’t talk to each other using words. I’m accepting of any race.”

If it’s possible to have a conversation, then it’s usually possible to work something out. If it’s impossible to communicate, then that’s another matter.

After Victoria heard my story, she clapped her hands and gave instructions to the maid standing outside.

“Call in Ilya, Grenara, and Acatl.”

It sounded like those were other people she was calling in. Based on the flow of the conversation, I suspected she wanted to test if I genuinely had no prejudice against nonhumans.

This is a great chance to meet people that aren’t human! I clutched my teacup tightly to hide the fact that my hands were trembling with excitement.

There was a knock at the door. A woman whose lower half was a spider, a cow that walked on two legs, and what appeared to be a praying mantis entered the room and greeted me.

“What do you make of these three?” Victoria asked.

“I’m guessing Ilya is an arachne. Can you walk on the ceiling?! I’m impressed by how strong Grenara looks. I don’t know what race Acatl is, but those forelegs look awesome. I want to touch them!”

I got a little carried away and started to approach them. Ilya and Grenara were looking at me with shocked faces. Acatl’s face was the face of an insect, so I couldn’t read the expression. Acatl timidly extended a foreleg toward me. It seemed as though the

praying mantis didn't mind me touching it.

Once I had enough of Acatl's forelegs, I asked Ilya for permission to touch her spider legs. They had a good fluffy feeling, which got me even more excited.

Victoria's voice at last brought me to my senses.

"That's enough," she said sounding as though she'd gotten bored. "I see that you hold no prejudices."

"S-Sorry. I forgot myself."

Victoria accepted my apology with a smile and a nod before closing her eyes and appearing to become deep in thought. She remained motionless for some time. Eventually, she began speaking slowly. "Here's the final problem. What about the others from your world? Will they be able to accept us in the way that you can?"

"Yes, I think so," I said. "At the very least, my mother, who's our leader, will welcome you with a smile."

Victoria folded her arms and nodded deeply. Then she looked me in the eye and said something so incredible that I never could have seen it coming.

"I declare in the name of the Demon Lord Victoria that we, the Ursna Empire, will treat with the people of this other world!"

Although I was surprised to learn that Victoria was the demon lord, what really scared me was the thought of how mad Noa's own demon lord, my mom, was going to be when she learned that I entered the demon lord's territory without asking.

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

Three hours after Kouki's disappearance, his suit had been motionless for two hours and forty minutes. I couldn't wait any longer. I finally decided to give orders to Shuuichi as the commander of Noa.

"This situation is already beyond what the technology department can handle," I said. "Right now, I'm assigning full control to the military department. I'll trust everything to the military department's judgment from here on."

"Understood. We'll do whatever it takes to bring him back safe —"

"We have a transmission from Kouki! This is... a level-A emergency signal."

My heart felt ready to explode as I grabbed the microphone and yelled at Kouki. "Kou! What are you doing?! Where are you?"

Kouki appeared on the screen, looking nervous and ready to cry.

Did something bad happen to him? This is why I didn't want him going outside... I just hope he learns something from all of this.

I spoke softly to make Kouki less fearful and asked him once again. Finally he explained the situation to me.

"Don't be mad at me. I'm on the northern continent."

"I already knew that. It's okay. We'll come to get you right now."

I give Shuuichi a look urging him to go and get Kouki as soon as possible. Kouki was looking at me as if he was finding something difficult to say.

I can scold him for this later. Right now, I'm just grateful that he's safe.

"Is there something else you want to say?" I asked him.

"Promise you won't be mad. Here on the northern continent, I met the emperor of the Ursna Empire. I spoke to the Demon Lord Victoria as a representative of Noa. The Ursna Empire has accepted an offer to establish diplomatic relations with Noa."

Shuuichi caught me as I became lightheaded and close to fainting.

What did Kouki just say? Demon Lord? Diplomatic relations? He entered the demon lord's territory alone to negotiate with the demon lord herself?

I was so shocked that it made me lightheaded. Clare and the other staff were whispering among themselves with blank expressions: "I don't think that would be possible for anyone other than Kouki."

"That's enough, Kou," I said. "I value your ability to get things done, but where is this Ursna Empire? The satellite can't see you. Are you underground?"

"About that... Can you estimate my position from where you are? If so, I want you to zoom out the satellite camera so it displays an area with a 300-kilometer radius."

I gave the order to the staff operating the satellite. The live satellite image soon displayed an area with a radius of 300 kilometers centered on Kouki's location. I let Kouki know once the

adjustment was made.

“Is it ready? Okay. Victoria, please go ahead.”

The moment that we heard Kouki make his request to the demon lord, there was a commotion among all the staff in the control center. The satellite had been displaying nothing but blackened mountain ranges and narrow rivers. Then there was noise in the image, and some of the mountain ranges and rivers vanished. What gradually came into view was a massive castle and the true form of the Ursna Empire, which was rich with green plant life.

“It can’t be... Is this electronic jamming? Even on Earth, electronic jamming on this scale isn’t possible!”

“I don’t think that’s it,” he said. “Several thousand magic knights of the Ursna Empire have set up an ultrawide detection jamming magic. They didn’t actually want to go to war, so they hid their location using magic. Isn’t that amazing?”

This is beyond amazing. Their magic defeated our state-of-the-art surveillance equipment. The thought of such magical technology was enough to make me break into a cold sweat. Then Kouki dealt the final blow.

“So... Victoria wants to visit Noa Island. Could you come get her?”

I spent half a day in meetings trying to come up with a way to make contact with the demon lord, and now Kouki had rendered it all meaningless with a few words. It was difficult not to feel angry at him as I started making preparations to welcome the demon lord.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After bringing Victoria back to Noa Island with me, I was treated to Macho Man's strongest punch for running off by myself and entering the demon lord's territory.

As a further punishment, I was ordered to spend three days in the detention barracks, but this was reduced to a single day's detention in my own room in recognition of the fact that I'd set up negotiations with Victoria.

Before heading to my room, I used the post exchange to buy tomatoes and fruit as payment to Kon. Something didn't seem right as I watched Kon eating the fruit I'd given him. Despite being only 40 centimeters long, he had no trouble eating an entire melon, skin and all.

"Kon?" Kon noticed me and wrote a message for me on paper. "I'm not giving it to you."

"I don't want it!"

Who would want your half-eaten food? What I want to know is how you can eat your own body weight in food without any trouble. Isn't that weird?! That melon is about the same size as your body.

"Kon... When you eat food, where does it go?" I asked.

"It gets instantly converted to magic energy and absorbed. That's why I don't excrete waste." Kon had gotten good at writing with his tail without using his hands, so he was able to explain this while he ate the melon.

So the more Kon eats, the more magic energy he has? If he was constantly eating, he could increase his magic energy end-

lessly, and we'd get all the gold bars and jewels we could ever want.

“You look as though you’re thinking something bad. I do eventually feel full, so I can’t have limitless magic,” Kon wrote after glancing at me.

This damn half-lizard.

“I wasn’t thinking anything like that. Don’t write weird things, you stupid half-lizard.”

“Kon?! Kon! Gruu...” Kon let out a quiet yet menacing growl as if I made him angry.

That made me hesitate for a moment, but I didn’t want to back down now. “How can you be a dragon if you can’t fly or breathe fire?” I muttered. “You’re not as graceful as Victoria, and you can’t cloak yourself in cold air like those ice spirit maids...”

Kon must have heard me. He clutched his watermelon tightly and began writing angrily on the ground with a swish of his tail. “When I roared at the demon lord, she was obviously frightened, right?! How can you rank her above me?! I might be a dragon, but that’s not my race. I’m a god-race ancient dragon. Ordinary black dragons and dimension dragons aren’t even capable of equivalent exchanges or metal alchemy!”

I’m sure he’s lying. I’ll bet ancient dragons are just the race that’s most full of themselves.

“Don’t lie,” I said. “If you’re so great, then why can’t you speak? If you can use legendary magic, then learning to use human speech should be easy.”

Kon’s wings and tail suddenly became limp. And he began writing unhappily. “When I was born... my mother had already

passed away. There were no others from my race around me. As a defense against our enemies, I entered a dormant state while I was still an infant. It required a lot of energy to restore me from that dormant state. I thought that someday my own kind would find me and supply that magical energy. But instead, you carried me off and woke me up in another world.”

I forgot about that. I hadn't known he was in a dormant state, but it was me who carried Kon away from his own world to Earth. Obviously, there weren't any creatures that could teach Kon magic in our world. No one could even understand dragon language, so Kon was forced to teach himself to write.

I realized that it had all been my fault. I was still lost for words when Kon showed me more writing.

“I don't regret it, Master. You, your mother, Alice, and everyone else have been so kind to me. That's why I'm happy with how things are. I'm happy with how things are! But please don't forget that I'm an incredible dragon.”

After he'd finished writing, Kon went back to eating the melon with new energy.

Feeling a little embarrassed, I spoke just loud enough for Kon to hear: “Thank you.”

The great dragon before me responded with a gentle wag of his tail.

**

I knew that being detained in my room would mean I couldn't touch my terminal or any of my books for a whole day, but I hadn't realized how slowly time would pass with nothing to do.

I was lying on my back, staring at the ceiling and petting Kon's

head, when I realized there were suddenly a lot of people moving around in the corridor outside.

I sat up and strained to hear. I heard the sound of helicopter rotors from far off. It wasn't just the sound of one or two helicopters; I got the impression that dozens of helicopters were about to take off.

“Did something happen?”

“Kon...”

Just as Kon and I looked at each other, we heard the sound of the door being unlocked. Clare entered, out of breath and looking afraid.

“Kouki, your detention is over.”

“What happened?”

“One hour ago, the human alliance, led by the Capus Kingdom, declared war against the Merkava Kingdom. Our security assurance pact states that Noa must enter the war as an ally of the Merkava Kingdom. I'm sure Miki will explain it to you in more detail. Quickly get ready to leave.”

I couldn't understand why it was necessary for me to be go anywhere, but I did as Clare said by putting on my white military uniform and leaving the room. Kon held onto my arm wearing a card stating “Noa” around from his neck. Together, we followed after Clare.

When we entered the underground command center, Mom, Macho Man, Cassis, Adrienne, and Victoria were all sitting around a table looking in our direction.

“Kouki, come here quickly,” Mom said.

I followed her instruction and sat in an empty chair. She explained the current situation to me.

“I expect Clare has explained the gist already. The Capus Kingdom has declared war against the Merkava Kingdom. Their allies—the Ragille Principality, the Recule Holy State, and the Rinkdofr Empire—have also declared war against the Merkava Kingdom. The aim of their Human Alliance Force is to eradicate all demi-human races.”

“Is this a joke?” I said incredulously. “Do those four nations seriously think they can eradicate all demi-humans from this world? They’ll run out of manpower and resources first, and the alliance will collapse.”

“Actually, it’s not just four nations. A number of small nations and city states in the surrounding area have also joined forces with them. It’s actually an alliance of twelve nations.”

Doesn’t that mean we’re screwed?! How can you look so calm about this? Noa can just barely scrape together 80,000 soldiers. If the kingdom’s standing army was mobilized, we might be able to gather a force of 100,000 soldiers. Twelve nations combined are obviously going to come at us with a big army of at least 500,000 fighters...

“How will we set up lines of defense?” I asked. “We’re bound to lose any war of attrition.”

“Defensive lines? What are you saying? We’re going to attack them first. Isn’t that why you asked Victoria to lend the strength of the empire’s army to us?”

I said nothing like that! All I said was, “Lend us your strength so that Noa can live in this world.” I never encouraged a war!

I was about to explain away the misunderstanding but my

mom resumed talking before I had the chance.

“Well, then. We’re taking this situation very seriously. We’re canceling all peace talks and forming our own military coalition. The three nations of Noa, the Merkava Kingdom, and the Ursna Empire will join forces to form the Multi-Race Coalition Force to fight against the Human Alliance Force.”

When you say we’re going to fight, that means we’re going to be killing each other. The whole reason we came to this world in the first place was to avoid that sort of thing. I’m not cold enough to ask her if she’s prepared to kill, but I don’t want us to fight if we could resolve this through discussion. Shouldn’t we make at least one more attempt to make peace with the alliance forces?

“Mom, I don’t want us to kill each other.”

“Don’t worry...” Mom said with a smile. “There’ll be a war, but we won’t be killing each other. I’ve thought about this carefully. That’s why we need your cooperation.”

She softly stroked my hair.

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Victoria's Point of View

“Don’t worry... There’ll be a war, but we won’t be killing each other. I’ve thought about this carefully. That’s why we need your cooperation.”

Miki was stroking Kouki’s hair, but I didn’t understand how she expected to conquer the alliance forces without blood being shed. *I doubt she intends to surrender. It’s clear from our previous discussions that Kouki’s mother Miki is an accomplished strategist. I suppose I should ask her...*

I spoke up. “Miki, forgive me, but I cannot imagine how we can solve this without blood being shed.”

Miki answered my question with the aid of an image that appeared on a magic item resembling a magic mirror.

“We plan to use a knockout gas that’s an improved version of BZ gas. They’ll inhale the gas and pass out. Then we’ll tie them up and take their weapons. If close combat becomes unavoidable, I’d like you to use stun swords supplied by Noa. Anyone hit with a stun sword will be knocked unconscious by high-voltage electricity. In the unlikely event that these weapons aren’t enough to suppress the enemy, I’ll authorize the use of lethal weapons, but in that case, please contact one of Noa’s emergency response teams deployed nearby. I’d like this war to end without a single casualty.”

“The combined power of demi-humans and this technology from another world could indeed make it possible to end this war without bloodshed,” I said, nodding. “However... why should we go to such trouble? We’ve been mistreated by humans for so many years. I wouldn’t be saddened to see them exterminated. Noa’s people are from a different world; you should feel no sense

of kinship with humans of this world.”

Although the princesses of the kingdom didn’t fully agree with my suggestion of eradicating the alliance, they didn’t seem truly against the idea. I waited for Miki to justify her position.

“I have a question.” Kouki spoke before Miki could. “Why have you all been persecuted as demi-humans?”

“Humans suddenly attacked us,” I said. “When we fought back, they began to subjugate and enslave some of the less prosperous races.”

Miki remained quiet and deep in thought. This discussion was bringing back old memories.

Humans cause me so much anger. We would be better off eradicating such a barbaric race. I decided that, depending on Miki’s response, the Empire might pursue this end alone.

Kouki tilted his head and asked another question. “Did the humans really attack you for no reason at all? There wasn’t a vampire race drinking the blood of humans? There wasn’t a fairy race kidnapping human children? There wasn’t a spirit race possessing humans and playing tricks on them?”

“What are you implying?” I demanded.

“From the viewpoint of demi-humans, they may have been doing what they needed to survive, or maybe they were just playing pranks. But I think humans would see it as a threat. If a lone human is no match for a demi-human, then it’s only natural for intelligent creatures to gather together for protection. If one of those groups is wiped out now, humans on other continents will worry that they might be next, and they’ll become hostile. Do you want to keep on fighting until one side has been wiped out completely? Let’s put an end to this pointless fighting. We can move

beyond it if we have the courage to try.”

Kouki’s words brought me to a realization. This boy from another world was a messenger from the gods sent to guide us demi-humans.

Several thousand years in the future, in an age when the existence of Noa was considered a myth, historians, who were normally reluctant to change their ideas, would gather and reach a shared conclusion.

“There was once a time, during what might be called the dark age of this world, in which demi-humans were persecuted. That dark age ended thanks to several heroes. Saint Adrienne, Cassis the Wise, the Demon Lord Victoria, and the witch Miki from another world. And one who, despite accomplishing more than any other, is barely mentioned in the remaining texts: the devil Kouki. The age of light that continues to this day is no doubt an age established by these five heroes.”

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

Once I was confident that Kouki's words had been enough to make Victoria and the princesses agree to avoid a fruitless war, I began explaining the strategy of our coalition forces.

"As I've already mentioned, the coalition forces will not be forming lines of defense. If the enemy attacks us, we will drive them back with force."

To the west of the Merkava Kingdom was the sea, to the north was the Rinkdolfr Empire, and to the east was the Ragille Principality. The kingdom was surrounded with nowhere to run. To the south was a desert, and deploying forces there was impractical. Their location would ordinarily leave them with no hope, but with us and the Ursna Empire as allies, they were actually in a great location.

I explained how our coalition forces were going to attack while referring to an image from the satellite displayed on a screen.

"Please take a look at this. The red markings are the alliance forces, and the blue markings are the coalition forces. The intelligence department predicts that the alliance forces will simultaneously attack from the north and east. That's why we've split the coalition forces into three groups and deployed them on three different battlefronts."

"Hm. Are the north and east not simply two battlefronts?" asked Victoria as she looked doubtfully at the screen.

Given the cultural level of this world, battles probably took place either on land dominated by groups of knights or in the sky where a small number of riders using dragons and suchlike would fight to maintain aerial dominance. But our technology meant

that the sea was another important battle arena.

“Yes, three battlefronts,” I said. “Noa’s main forces aim to attack the Rinkdolfr Empire in the north from the sea. That’s why we need you to suppress the enemy’s main forces in the kingdom.”

“We’ll use all of our power to push back the alliance forces... but our numbers...” Princess Cassis said while staring at her feet.

The empire expected that an army of 120,000 soldiers would attack from the north. They would be sure to scatter the kingdom’s knights effortlessly.

“There is no cause for concern,” I said. “We’ll give the kingdom the use of all of Noa’s Alice-type land battleships. They’ll act according to your wishes. Use them as you see fit, even if that means they’ll be destroyed.”

“Hah?! But, if you’re going to let us use your main weapons, how is Noa going to fight?”

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding. The land battleship isn’t our most powerful weapon. Those are merely weapons made for propaganda purposes; they show off our technological capabilities.”

I smiled despite myself at the sight of Princess Cassis and Princess Adrienne left speechless by my words. I was proud of my son Kouki’s work, but we had something other than the weapon he asked us to create. And that weapon was the true power of Noa.

The princesses remained frozen as I turned my attention to Victoria to give her a rough explanation of our strategy. “Victoria, I’d like the Ursna Empire to take charge of the eastern battle lines. We expect that 250,000 soldiers from the Ragille Principal-

ity will attack from the East.”

“250,000? They may be mere humans, but if there are so many... this will be difficult. I must ask that Noa lend us power, too.”

“I understand. We will lend the Ursna Empire our airborne-type destroyer, the *Oort*, and one brigade of powered suits. Please use them to break through their battle lines.”

Victoria looked confused when I mentioned the *Oort*. I decided it would be quicker to show it to her than explain it.

The *Oort* was originally a space destroyer that used gravitational collapse bomb technology and could fly within the atmosphere. Kouki looked disappointed when I showed him the completed project.

“This isn’t an airborne battleship,” he’d complained. “I was thinking of something more like a floating version of a Japanese battleship like the *Fuso* or the *Yamashiro*.”

That would’ve been impossible from a technological standpoint. And what would be the point of recreating the warship that’s more than 200 years old and making it fly? I remembered that scene for a short while, and then collected myself.

I looked at everyone present and said, “I think it’s going to be an incredibly difficult fight. But if we succeed, we’re sure to change this world. We’ll use our power to make the future our own.”

Everyone agreed enthusiastically, and a declaration of war against the human alliance was signed by our three nations.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After Victoria and the princesses returned to their own territories, I remained sitting at the table talking to my mom. I still didn't know what I was there to do.

"Kou, you're going to attack from the sea," she said. "We'll need to rely on your eighth-generation suit. You'll scatter knock-out gas around the battlefield, much like the time when you rescued Alice."

"Well, I don't mind, but... I can't get there from Noa Island. Even my suit has a limited cruising range."

Although my suit was capable of cruising for as far as 3,200 kilometers, that would be reduced by about half after we loaded a good number of missiles on to the suit.

"Don't worry," she said. "The powered suit carrier ship that I asked for has been finished, so we can move around freely."

Oh! The flying battleship might not have been what I imagined, but hopefully this carrier ship will be just so! Then there's that roaring device I asked to have fitted to my suit... I put a lot of effort into that. I wonder if they finished fitting it?

I shared the data with Shingo, and he thought it was great, so I wanted to equip it sometime soon.

"Mom, did they finish installing the roaring device I asked for?" I asked.

A smile appeared on her face before she replied. "Y-Yes. It's finished, but do you really want to use it? I think another type of voice would..."

No! I won't accept that. My suit's design is based on the demon Satanachia. Any other voice won't do. Do you know how many hours I spent making that voice?!

“No, leave it how it is. I think the development of the wings and tail using the data we found in the moon relic should be just about done, too...”

“We’ve fitted those as well, but do you really like the way it looks? You don’t regret this?”

“I like it how it is.”

She mumbled something like, “I thought we raised him better than this,” but it was my mom who had the problem. She didn’t understand this was the kind of thing that set a man’s heart racing!

I’d heard that the engineers handling the renewal of my suit fittings were now calling it the “remodeled eighth generation suit.” The remodel had three improvements: First, the exposed thrusters were now covered with armored plates, designed to look like six wings, to improve durability. Second, the balancer had been converted from a weight in the legs to a long tail attached to the lower back, making it possible for the suit to walk on four legs across land at high speed. Third, the color of the body had been changed from black to white and gold.

To match with the remodeled design, the suit had been given the unique name of *Satanachia*, and I forced them to change its call sign from “OF-7-001” to “Goetia.”

“Miki, we’ve made preparations to sortie.”

I was absorbed in my fantasies about my new suit when Clare announced to Mom that preparations were finished. Thanks to our rapid response team, Noa was capable of preparing for battle

extremely fast. I was impressed.

“Kouki’s suit has also been fully loaded,” Clare said calmly. “I’ve sent orders to our forces in the north, in Miki’s name, to announce a change in commanding officer, so please join them at the designated location as soon as possible.”

Wait a minute, I’m in command again?! That makes no sense! Get a professional soldier to do it. Noa is full of elite soldiers from the United Nations; you shouldn’t need me!

“Um... I’m being assigned as—”

“Your mother and father will be commanding the Noa units cooperating with the kingdom and the empire,” Mom said. “Let’s meet up at the congregation point after breaking through the battle lines. By the way, *Satanachia*’s wings and tail are overpowered even by our own world’s standards. Once this war is over, we’ll need to destroy those fittings along with all the data.”

Mom said all this important stuff like it was nothing before leaving for the conference room together with Elise.

I decided that once this war was over, I was definitely going back to Earth.

**

Three days later, 2,600 kilometers north of Noa Island, I was in command of our northern front force. We were waiting for some final supplies to arrive and for permission to enter into the territory of the Rinkdolfr Empire.

Just like last time, Clare was backing me up because I was useless as a commander. She was communicating with the control center on Noa Island. I could tell we’d been given permission by the look on her face.

“We’ve received a transmission from the command center. The Merkava Kingdom’s forces have entered into combat with the Rinkdolfr Empire at the border. At the same time, the Ursna Empire encountered a reconnaissance team from the Ragille Principality and have begun an all-out attack. They have crossed the border to pursue them.”

Victoria’s a little too war-happy! Can’t she keep to the same pace as the rest of us?! I was starting to feel a little anxious.

“Given the situation, the command center has given us permission to invade the Rinkdolfr Empire,” Clare said. “Their orders are, ‘Force the coastal city in the empire’s territory to surrender.’”

“Understood. Let’s get moving immediately. I’ll leave the details up to Clare and the captain. Please do what you think is best.”

They both saluted happily in response to my orders.

This is how it has to be. We have a much better chance of surviving if they give commands themselves rather than some know-nothing kid like myself. I realize I’m just here as a figure-head, but it feels bad when I’m sitting here where everyone can see me. I wish I didn’t have to be here...

I asked a nearby female crew member to bring me more coffee before slumping into my chair and closing my eyes. I started nervously sipping at the coffee and playing with Kon when the person operating the radar suddenly began to shout.

“Airborne units are approaching from a bearing of 3-1-1! There are... 40 of them!”

An enemy attack team? There should have been no way for the Rinkdolfr Empire to have known we were in this region of the

sea. I looked over at the captain to see how he was handling things. He gave an order to launch interceptor aircraft, but Clare had him rescind the order.

“I checked with the control center. The approaching unit are 40 dragon riders dispatched by the Ursna Empire to support us. They’re led by Viscount Acatl of the Mantis Race.”

Acatl?! That praying mantis person is here to support us! So there are forty praying mantises riding dragons into battle... I imagined that must look pretty cool. What should I do...? I want to see Acatl. Maybe I can have half of them land on this carrier. I guess it’s okay to be a little selfish. I am the commander, after all.

“Captain, would it be okay for twenty of them to land on this ship and the other twenty to land on the *Unit #2 Mermaid*? I want to see Acatl.”

“Understood. Navigation officer! Have twenty members of their unit, including Viscount Acatl, come aboard. Have the remaining units land on the *Mermaid*.”

The landing permission had been given so easily that I felt as though being the commanding officer gave me a lot of power, but I was more focused on meeting Acatl. I told Clare I wanted to go greet Acatl on the deck, but for some reason she insisted on coming with me.

The two of us headed for the deck. On the way there I asked her why she wanted to come with me.

“Clare, you know that Acatl is part of our coalition, right? I don’t think there’s any danger in me going alone.”

“It’s not that. What I’m worried about is your bad habits, Major General. You have no prejudice against demi-human races

and you're able to treat any kind of race equally. Personally, I have trouble dealing with the centipede race in the underground combat engineer unit. I've seen you eating meals together with members of the centipede race, and at first I thought everyone at Noa should try to follow your example afterward. But..."

But what? I don't remember causing any problems lately. I even let Cote take my orichalcum!

"But once you get excited, you start touching the demi-humans. The Mantis race is one thing... but Ilya of the arachne race has those spider legs. If she were human, you'd have been getting excited and rubbing her thighs. I realize that Ilya had no ulterior motives, but who's to say she won't report you for sexual harassment?"

Seriously? I'll have to give Ilya a serious apology next time I see her, I realized. Well, that explains why all of the female demi-human soldiers have been avoiding me. I'll bet that all of the Ursna Empire's soldiers are spreading rumors about Noa's Special Major General being a pervert.

The thought left me feeling awful as we stepped out onto the deck. The dragon riders were in the process of landing.

"They really are praying mantises riding dragons," Clare said in surprise.

The scene left me speechless. You'd normally picture a dragon rider to be a black or white knight heroically riding the dragon, but these dragon riders were bugs sitting on the dragons' backs. It completely destroyed how I imagined such fantasy scenes, but this was cool in its own way.

As we watched, the dragons slowly flew down in circles before landing on the deck. The first dragon rider to land was wearing a beautiful sword at their waist, so I was sure this was Acatl, the

one I met at the demon lord's castle. It'd been a while since the last time we saw each other, so I ran over to talk.

"Long time no see, Acatl. Your forelegs are looking as cool as ever. Can I touch them again?" I decided to take Clare's lecture to heart and ask for permission before touching from now on.

Acatl extended a foreleg toward me, moving carefully so that I wouldn't be injured. While touching Acatl's leg I noticed that there was a strap around Acatl's body that was glowing as if it was made from some mysterious material. I poked it with my finger and Acatl's mouth began to make clattering noises as if speaking.

"Kacha... Gachacha... Kachakcha."

"Acatl, I'm sorry but I don't understand mantis language. Would you be able to use translation magic?"

In response, Acatl took a step back and a magic circle appeared in the air. I watched with excitement because this was the first time I'd seen this kind of magic in use. The magic circle shined with a bright green light and then enveloped Acatl. Everyone from Noa on the deck was also watching the spectacle with amazement and wondered what was happening.

After the light subsided, something happened that surprised everyone even more.

"You should be able to understand my speech now. Is it working?"

The person standing before me and speaking in human words was a woman wearing a beautiful dark green dress with a beautiful sword hanging from her waist. For a moment I was confused, but finally I asked the woman a question.

"Uh... Are... Are you Acatl?"

“Yes. My name is Mindena Acatl. Oh. I hadn’t introduced myself. Under the orders of Empress Victoria, I have brought forty dragon riders to support your efforts, Major General.”

I realized that the strap I’d just touched was worn over the area of her breasts. As Clare would have put it, just now, I’d been getting excited while touching her breasts.

Well that leaves just one thing for me to do.

“Acatl! I’m so sorry!” My head hit the deck near her feet as I kneeled to apologize for how rude I’d been.

**

Acatl's Point of View

“Acatl! I’m so sorry!”

We were still introducing ourselves to each other when Kouki began rubbing his head against the ground and apologizing to me. I was so shocked that I didn’t know how to react. The woman standing beside him explained what was happening.

“The major general was touching your chest without realizing it, and now he’s apologizing. He’s ordinarily very wise and capable, but he’s a little odd when he meets uncommon races. I suspect that he wasn’t aware you were female.”

I see. Kouki must not realize that we don’t particularly mind being touched by humans.

Part of me found this amusing and wanted to let it go on a while longer, but Kouki was an important leader in the coalition. I couldn’t allow His Majesty the Devil to remain lying on the floor, so I asked him to rise to his feet.

“Please don’t be concerned. We mantises have no objections to being touched by humans. Though some other races may find it unpleasant, so please take care.”

Kouki stood up with his eyes filled with tears. He bowed his head and asked, “I had no idea you were female, Acatl. Are there a lot of female soldiers in the empire’s forces?”

“Not in general. The females of insect races tend to be stronger than the males. For other races, there is a higher ratio of males.”

Kouki seemed to understand and nodded his head. Truth be told, this discussion felt trivial. The ship was of more interest to me. Although the ship had been described to us before we re-

ceived orders to support Noa, I thought my heart would stop when I first saw this ship floating in the sea.

“Major General, is this ship made of ice?” I asked.

“That’s right. The name of this ship is *Iceberg-type Powered Suit Carrier Siren*. The ship over there that looks slightly different is the *Iceberg-type Powered Suit Carrier Mermaid*. Noa’s engineers built these new ships after taking one of my jokes seriously. They’re pretty big, aren’t they? In our units of measurement, they’re 700 meters long.”

That’s more than just “pretty big.” But this is His Majesty the Devil speaking, so I’d best not contradict him.

I looked around me and saw that members of my team were using their forelegs to test the strength of the ice. I panicked and told them to stop, but Kouki just laughed.

“It’s cold out here, so why don’t we go inside?” he asked. “It’s almost lunchtime. Would the other members of the mantis race also like to come inside and eat something?”

I wasn’t sure whether or not this was a joke. “You’d allow us demi-humans eat together with the humans?”

“Yes. No one here at Noa has any problems with demi-humans. That said, some of them aren’t comfortable around insects, so please try not to get too close to those people.”

Even now there was a part of me that didn’t trust humans, but it seemed as though we could truly rely on these people of Noa from the other world.

With gratitude, I told Kouki, “We’d be honored to join you.” Then I went over to a member of my group who was still chipping away at the ice despite my earlier warning, and I kicked her over.

“So, they’re not treating me like I’m... a pervert?” Kouki asked.

“No, the reason no one will approach you, Major General, is because there are some who call you the devil.”

After eating, I joined Kouki for tea. He wanted to talk about whether he was hated by the female soldiers of the empire’s forces. He thought their attitude toward him was the result of him touching me and Ilya, but that was a misunderstanding.

For most of the female soldiers, the thought of speaking to His Majesty the Devil, who ranked even higher than Empress Victoria, was a daunting prospect. Kouki appeared troubled by this idea, and he wouldn’t accept it.

“I’m not a devil or anything like that. And this here... his name is Kon, appropriately enough. He’s an ancient dragon.”

Kouki picked up Kon, who was eating food on the table.

It appeared that Kouki hadn’t understood. There was a fairy tale that had been told among us demi-humans for a long time. One might call it a prophecy.

It went like this: “From a crack in time will emerge a demon, and then this world will perish. Thereafter the demon will give rise to the devil who controls rebirth, and this world will be born anew.”

Could the people of Noa be the ones the legend spoke of? I heard that time passed differently in their world compared to ours. And I was certain that the demon referred to the armor worn by Kouki. I was about to explain this to Kouki, but then Clare entered the room.

“Major General, we have one hour remaining before the operation will begin. Please be ready.”

“Understood,” he said. “I know we can’t allow every member of the supporting force in, but could we at least give Acatl permission to enter the CIC room? She came all this way to support us, so I think we owe it to her.”

“Yes, I thought you’d say that. I’ve already gotten permission from the captain. The other members of the mantis race may rest in the field officer’s recreation area.”

Clare guided me as I followed behind her. On the way there, Kouki left us and headed somewhere else.

“Will the major general be watching the battle from another room?” I asked out of curiosity.

“No, the major general will sortie when the operation begins. The northern front force... or more precisely, the powered suit that the major general wears, is the most powerful part of our army.”

This other world must be lacking in common sense if they’d have their commanding officer sortie. Though I expect he’ll return unharmed, so I won’t object.

We soon arrived before a room with a sturdy iron door. On either side of the door stood guards holding weapons. On Noa Island, I’d learned that these weapons were known as rifles. I could immediately tell that this room was important.

“Miss Acatl, the entire battlefield will be controlled from this room. It’s known as the CIC. I must ask that you refrain from touching any of the equipment inside the room.”

“I understand.”

I stepped inside and saw there were men in black uniforms talking and laughing.

“I’m Carter, captain of the *Siren*. We welcome the support of the Ursna Empire. Please take a seat over here.”

Carter thanked me and showed me to a seat before giving me a simple overview of the equipment of the room and how they planned to proceed.

“The large screen over there shows us what’s happening outside. It works similarly to magic items for seeing things far away. The round screen on the right side is a radar. It’s a tool that can sometimes detect ships beyond the horizon. I don’t think I could adequately explain the other equipment we’ve got here, so I won’t try to do so right now.

“Next, let me explain our schedule. In approximately 45 minutes, a coastal city of the Rinkdolf Empire will be within our attack range. As soon as it comes into range, the major general will use his suit, the *Satanachia*, to break through an area where we expect the enemy’s defenses are located. After he disperses knockout gas, a team of powered suits will follow behind him to suppress the enemy. Although this is an enemy nation, we can’t use the ship’s cannons to attack the city because a large number of civilians live there.”

It seemed they were trying to take the city while causing a minimum amount of harm. I admired the way Noa were taking such pains to avoid injuring their opponents.

Kouki appeared on the screen and began talking to Clare. “Can you hear me? I’m done preparing. Though I don’t see why I need to be inside this capsule thing.”

“Major General, that’s an armored capsule designed for descending through atmosphere,” she said. “It has an extremely

high level of heat and shock resistance. It's perfect for breaking through the enemy's defenses. I hope you weren't about to head out to the battlefield with thoughts like, 'I want to fly in because that'll look cool.' No matter how much of a talented pilot you are, it's too dangerous. You're not authorized to fly there."

"...Okay."

It took him an awfully long time to reply. Was the major general really hoping to fly through the sky?

As a dragon rider who specialized in flying, even I was against the idea of flying over enemy installations without any thought. I was having trouble determining whether or not Kouki was genuinely the wise person that Clare said he was.

"We'll be in position to attack within 180 seconds," Carter said loudly. "*Satanachia*, prepare to launch."

"Preparation complete. Brace for launch. Begin countdown."

"160... 159... 158..."

The friendly expression that Kouki had shown me before vanished, and now he seemed completely focused as he prepared to sortie. All I could do now was pray for the safe return of Kouki and the Noa soldiers who followed behind him. I prayed as if those heading out to the battlefield were friends whom I'd spent many years fighting alongside.

The time soon arrived. "5... 4... 3... 2... launch *Satanachia*!"

The instant Carter gave the command, the image on the screen changed to display the coastal city of the Rinkdofr Empire and a large object flying toward it. When the image was enlarged, the thing that had fallen on the coast looked just like an egg. *Could this be the capsule they mentioned?*

Kouki should have been inside, but there was no movement. Just as people in the room were becoming nervous, we heard Kouki's voice.

“Um... The capsule's opening mechanism is broken. I can't open it... Now what?”

“Please force your way out. You're in the *Satanachia*, so you should be able to smash it open,” Clare replied to Kouki sounding somewhat tired.

Is he not at all nervous when heading into battle?

Kouki replied with a very casual sounding, “All right,” and then there was the sound of metal against metal as he hit against the capsule. The sound was accompanied by the image of the egg breaking open on the screen. A hand emerged from inside.

Eventually there was an arm... and then a head... and then the whole upper body. The demon gradually emerged from the egg until finally the lower body became visible with a long tail hanging behind it. The demon displayed on the screen roared, seemingly displeased about having been sealed in the egg.

“GREAAAAAAAAAW!”

When I heard that abnormal cry, I was certain of it.

It is beyond all doubt. The devil that hatched from the egg is roaring to announce to all living things in this world that this world will perish.

Chapter 5: The Day the Devil Hatched

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

As I was struggling to break free of the armored capsule, I accidentally hit the button for making the suit roar.

The moment I pressed the button, speakers on the exterior of the *Satanachia* produced a sound that was similar to a badly tuned violin. My only feeling was regret. I was planning to use the roar to make my descent cooler. It would have been like I was announcing, “Satanachia has descended upon you!” but instead it’d been a total waste.

In the struggle to break out of the capsule, Kon ended up on my head. The whole thing had put me in a bad mood, and I wanted somewhere to vent my anger, so I grabbed him by the tail and put him down on my lap. Kon made a cute “kokyuu...” sound and looked like he was still dizzy, so I petted him while thinking about what to do next.

I suppose I'll tell Clare what's happening.

“I’ve successfully broken free from the capsule,” I said. “Next I’ll suppress the enemy’s—”

“Major General, what’s wrong? Is there some sort of emergency?!”

Clare’s words barely registered as she shouted at me through the speakers. I was more focused on the image from an external camera that had caught my eye as I was speaking. I was looking at

a group of the Rinkdolfr Empire's knights surrounding the area of the coast where I landed. Every last one of them was lying on the ground.

Did I knock down all of these knights while I was breaking free? Using a powered suit to hit an unarmored human would cause instant death. I felt cold sweat running down my back as I hurried over to the knights to scan for signs of life.

"They're breathing... Looks like their hearts are beating, too. I guess they just fainted?"

That was a relief. I took a better look at the area and noticed one of the knights who hadn't fainted was riding away on a horse-like creature.

I was glad there was someone around so I could ask what happened. I used my suit's four-legged walking ability to chase after the knight at high speed.

After catching up, I grabbed him in my right hand and asked, "So... what happened here? Is this country at war with the coalition forces?"

"Let me go! Please, I have a wife and child! Please don't eat me...!"

Oh, right. I can't understand anything when we're not using translation magic. Maybe Acatl could interpret for me.

I used my communication device to contact Acatl, who I figured would be in the CIC of the *Siren*.

Acatl told me what the knight was saying, and then added, "Major General... the human knight is terrified. Forgive me for saying so, but I believe that anyone would expect to be eaten after having a demon charge after them at high speed like that."

I immediately let go of the knight. He crawled away as if he was too afraid to stand.

Is this suit really that scary?! It's like people in this world don't feel any passion. Once this war is over, I'll have to show everyone how awesome the Satanachia is, starting with the coalition force.

Another transmission arrived; it was from Clare this time. "Major General, the front gate of their fortress has opened, and they're displaying a flag of surrender. The city has realized that they can't continue this war any longer. Please return to the *Siren* and leave the rest to the team following behind. You've done a great job."

A great job? I didn't even do anything! For some reason, even the captain was saying, "I'd expect no less from the major general." *I spent all that time in front of the mirror practicing the way I'd say, "Go on without me; I'll hold them off here," all for nothing. This was supposed to be my chance to look cool! This sucks. I may as well go back and sleep.*

Once I was back on the *Siren*, I decided I'd go straight back to my room and crawl into bed without even visiting the CIC. To protect Kon, who was lying in my lap, from the vibrations, I wrapped an arm around him as I ignited my thrusters.

**

That evening, when the leaders of the empire learned that Asti, the supposedly impregnable coastal city of the Rinkdolfr Empire, had fallen within just a few minutes, they initially called those claims absurd and refused to believe what they were hearing.

But some members of an anti-war faction were concerned enough to send out scouts of their own. They confirmed that the information was accurate based on reports from garrisoned sol-

diers who had withdrawn from Asti.

The more knowledgeable leaders of the empire became somewhat doubtful about the course of the war, but even they could not have imagined they would be receiving further reports of their forces fleeing from the coalition that same night.

**

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

A small-scale skirmish was underway along the national border.

Meanwhile, Elise, who was serving as my personal adjutant aboard the *Alice*, was reporting the progress of the northern front force commanded by Kouki.

“The first attack brigade of the northern front force under the command of the special major general has captured the coastal city of Asti in the Rinkdolfr Empire’s territory. The city is now occupied by the northern front force,” she reported.

I was surprised. “They’ve won already?! That was awfully quick.”

Even with a fleet that includes an aircraft carrier and a battleship, it shouldn’t have been possible to carry out the attack that quickly. I hope they didn’t use live ammunition.

Feeling a touch uneasy, I asked Elise to continue. I soon realized that Kouki had put his genius to work to capture Asti.

“The special major general sortied from the *Siren* using a unique capsule design for re-entering the atmosphere. After forcing a landing on the coast, he used the roar device. Because he was in the capsule when creating the roar, the sound echoed and produced a sound wave with high directionality that hit a group of knights surrounding him. The shock wave was roughly equivalent to a direct hit from a stun grenade. Every member of the group of knights lost consciousness.”

I’m sure that was no accident... I pondered. But no ordinary person could have calculated the exact position of the suit and

the appropriate volume for the sound needed to create the right echo in such a short amount of time.

Victoria referred to Kouki as the devil. Lately, even I, his mother, had begun to worry that the boy was more than just human. I worried that someday he'd tell me, "Mom! Look! I can use magic now."

If it comes to it, I'll just have to learn magic myself and insist that Kouki is a human who inherited his abilities from me. But right now, I need to forget this nonsense and focus on the movement of the Merkava battle lines.

"Elise, what's the status of the front line?" I asked. "If we can't break through here quickly, Kouki will be left isolated in the empire's territory."

"There are currently two units of knights from the Merkava Kingdom who have been deployed to the front. The enemy is sending demi-human infantry to the front line. They appear to be holding back the main body of their forces to preserve their strength."

It sounds as though we've reached a stalemate. We're avoiding causing casualties on either side, but it's proving difficult to change the state of the battle in any real way because we can't deal a decisive blow. Perhaps we should hit them with an all-out attack?

"What percentage of the land battleships' ammunition is depleted?" I asked.

"When the sixteenth round of shelling is over, our ships will have used 50 percent of their ammunition. *Unit #2 Clare* has used the most ammunition, and is down to 32 percent."

This was unavoidable because the *Clare* had been in the mid-

dle of a supporting attack when the request for support shelling was made. The *Clare* would soon be useless unless I had it move to the rear to receive fresh supplies.

“Please give orders to the *Clare* to move to the rear to receive supplies,” I said. “Before they withdraw, have the powered suits aboard the *Clare* distributed between the people on the *Alice* and the *Miki*. Don’t forget to instruct the captain of each ship to give their approval. Also warn the kingdom that we’ll be firing a pan-jandrum.”

“Understood.”

I returned to my seat and crossed my legs; then I remembered something important. Elise was headed to talk to the communications officer, but I called her back.

“Could I get a cup of tea? No sugar; a little milk.”

“Yes, ma’am. Please wait just a moment,” Elise responded with a smile.

As Elise left, I sat back and began staring at the information displayed on the screens. I was thinking of a plan to break the deadlock in the battle.

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“Miki, Princess Cassis and General Auguste have requested permission to come aboard the *Alice* to discuss the state of the war,” Elise said.

“If the captain gives his approval, please guide them to the CIC,” I answered.

I’d been putting together the outline of a plan and drinking my tea when the kingdom’s request for a discussion reached me.

I feared that, rather than a discussion, they wanted to argue that it was impossible to hold the battle lines any longer; but I needed the kingdom's knights to hold out for at least another ten minutes.

Princess Cassis and General Auguste soon entered the CIC. They were both dressed in armor and looking exhausted.

"Miki, I must apologize for calling upon you so suddenly," said Cassis.

"No, not at all. I realize your knights won't be able to hold out much longer," I said.

Princess Cassis looked ready to cry as she responded. "Yes... Thanks to the efforts of Noa, no lives have been lost, but we've exhausted four orders of knights. The remaining knights are just barely capable of defending against another attack from the enemy. If our iron knights were here, we could hold out just a little longer..."

"They have another important duty, so that isn't an option," I said. "Even so, you've done well to hold out this long. I'd like to thank you on behalf of Noa."

I bowed to the princess, and she immediately insisted that I raise my head. Unfortunately, I knew I would have to ask that the kingdom's exhausted knights hold out a little longer. I had to show her my sincerity.

I raised my head to look the princess in the eye, then I told her of the plan I was thinking about. "The empire's offense will soon reach its limit. The moment they switch from attacking to defending, there'll be an opening that we can use to break through the enemy formation using our land battleships. I expect we can suppress their main force in one swift movement... but that will require your knights to endure one more intense attack from the

enemy. Would that be too much to ask?”

“...I understand,” the princess said, nodding. “I will order the knights to stand ground, no matter what happens.”

The princess was willing to cooperate, and she used a magic item to make contact with the knights. Now that I had her approval, I gave orders to all soldiers under my command.

“Attention all units! All land battleships are to prepare to break through the enemy formation. Powered suit units are to offer support to withdrawing knights of the kingdom.”

“We have a transmission from *Unit #2 Clare*,” the response came. “They have received supplies and are returning to the front line.”

I couldn't help but smile at how perfect the timing was. With each battleship standing side-by-side, we were bound to create an opening by holding down the empire's frontline force. We'd aim for that opening and fire the remaining panjandruns to disperse the knockout gas. This would open up a route to the enemy's main force. Their main force would then be suppressed by mobile infantry equipped with Noa's reinforced exoskeletons, and we'd be able to break through the battle lines.

Feeling relieved, I studied the arrangements of the troops displayed on the screen. That was when I noticed that something wasn't quite right.

“The troops in the right wing are being pushed back... I'm sure we deployed tanks to that location. Did something happen?”

“We're receiving conflicting reports,” said Elise. “Please wait while I contact the tank unit directly.”

It was hard to imagine that heavily armored tanks carrying

high explosives would withdraw so readily. Only an airstrike could push them back, but our intelligence officers suggested that the empire hadn't deployed any dragon riders in the battle lines. Even if dragon riders arrived later to offer support, these would have been detected by *Alice's* radar.

What's going on here?

"Urgent transmission from the tank unit! They state, 'We've encountered a large-scale enemy weapon in the right wing. Requesting backup... Requesting urgent backup.'"

Large-scale weapon? I found it hard to believe the Empire had that level of technology, but it was a fact that our tanks had withdrawn. I decided that I'd need to see this large-scale weapon with my own eyes before I could form an effective strategy. I asked for the right wing to be shown on the screen.

"I'm updating the display now," Elise said. "This image is being transmitted from a tank in the rearguard. This... this can't..."

Having brought it up on the screen, Elise was at loss for words at the sight of the humanoid giant that was displayed. It was more than five times the size of the powered suits that Noa used. The giant appeared to be twenty meters tall, but it was walking toward us without a hint of clumsiness.

"A giant golem?!" Cassis gasped. "How can the humans make it move?! It can't be!"

"Princess Cassis, do you know what it is?" I asked.

She turned pale as she described it to me. "It's an ancient weapon known as a giant golem, ordinarily used to besiege castles. It takes an incredible amount of magic to make them move, so not even demi-human races can handle them, let alone hu-

mans.”

“But right now it’s moving and coming toward us,” I said. “Do you have any idea how they’re making it move? Is there a person inside it?”

Princess Cassis frowned and went deep in thought. Eventually, she appeared to reach a conclusion. She grimaced as she shared her conclusion with me. “There is no human inside the golem. Giant golems are a form of automaton. To activate it... magical energy from hundreds of people isn’t enough. It also requires a soul. It would only be able to move if the life force of the living creature was used to activate it.”

I wished I could immediately use an imaginary number bomb to obliterate to the empire’s forces, but I bit my lip and pushed my feelings aside before yelling my instructions to the captain.

“Captain! You have permission to use live ammunition. Take out that hideous giant immediately.”

“Forgive me, but the ammunition on this ship will cause considerable damage to the golem’s surroundings. Is that acceptable?”

I forgot... We assumed we’d be using knockout gas, so we only have ordinary shells, and we aren’t carrying any shells that can be used to destroy a specific target.

“What about our heavy-armored powered suits?” I asked.

“They’re offering support to the kingdom’s knights as they withdraw. They could abandon them, but that might result in unacceptable levels of harm to the knights.”

“How could this happen?!”

I kicked over the admiral's chair with the high heels I was wearing.

At this rate, we'll lose the whole right wing. Should we use live ammunition despite knowing how much harm we'll cause?

Choosing that option would inevitably result in casualties. It would allow us to secure a tactical victory in this battle, but it would also be a strategic failure.

“Miki, the right wing's withdrawal is close to becoming a disorderly retreat,” Elise warned. “They can't take any more.”

“Miki, if we don't stop that giant golem immediately, the empire's practitioners will lose their lives!” cried Princess Cassis.

I was under pressure to make a decision. I apologized to Kouki in my heart for being unable to keep my promise of ending this war without casualties. I turned to the captain to authorize him to fire live ammunition from our main cannons, but then a transmission filled with noise played through the CIC of the *Alice*.

“—any... Can anyone hear me? The noise is really bad, so we're sending a one-way transmission over all frequencies. This is the ground attack aircraft, *Odin*. We're heading to your location to offer support under the orders of the special major general. Use infrared strobes to designate units in need of a supporting strike. We will attack the giant until we receive other instructions.”

It looks as though Kouki saved us again.

I watched the *Odin* slowly descend from the sky to the ground on the screen as I resumed drinking my now-cold tea.

Captain Martin's, of the *Odin*, Point of View

“Are we on standby today, Major?” the firing officer, Lucas, asked idly. He was straddling a large shell with a cigarette held in his mouth.

Either he's got some guts to be smoking in an area where sources of ignition are strictly prohibited, or he's just an idiot. If he wasn't such a skilled gunner, I'd have him removed from my team.

“Yeah, we need to be on standby and ready to scramble at any time,” I said. “Now get down from there! If you set that thing off, it'll send you into space.”

“Yeah, all right. But who would care about a bunch of good-for-nothings like us getting blown up? We're always on standby. We were useless on Earth, and we're just as useless in this world. I should've trained to be a powered suit user.”

I understood why Lucas felt so down. A good number of weapons that had fallen out of use on Earth had been retired from service. But there were two types of weapons that were difficult to retire completely.

The first were nuclear powered attack submarines carrying missiles. After advances in missile defense technology, several nations kept a small number of submarines simply because it was better to have a few than to have none at all.

The second were strategic bombers, which were what we were trained to operate. The abolition of nuclear weapons wasn't the only reason for their lack of use. In an age where powered suits could bring down planes, it was thought that bombers, which were slower than fighter planes but could cause damage over a

wider area, *might* be better to have than to be without. This meant they were considered even less useful than nuclear submarines.

Despite this, Lucas had been assigned to the bomber unit after entering the air force. It was easy to see why he was so frustrated, but I wished he would take his duties more seriously.

“Lucas, what happened to John?” I asked.

It was unusual for John not to be smoking together with him.

“John? He went off to the toilet with a magazine in his hand about thirty minutes ago. Link is over there, manicuring her nails.”

I get that there's no work to do, but this is a bit much! The Tolstoy's captain and his crew were in the exact same situation a while back, except they spent that time training hard. Now they're operating a land battleship!

There was suddenly a sound from the main communication terminal inside the aircraft, and a lamp lit up to indicate that a transmission was incoming from outside the base.

It's probably just the ground unit, planning to make fun of us as always, I thought as I jabbed the button to receive the transmission.

“Major Martin, captain of the *Odin* here. What do you want?”

As I waited for the caller to make the same old joke (“What? You mean this isn’t a pizza delivery service?”), I thought about what my comeback was going to be. But then a woman appeared on screen, looking less than amused.

“I am Lieutenant Colonel Clare Dauntless, adjutant to Special

Major General Kouki Arakawa, supreme commander of the northern front force. The major general wishes to speak with you directly. You seem like an insolent lot.”

What kind of prank is this? Kouki Arakawa? Isn't that Shu-uichi's son? He should be commanding Noa's main forces right about now and suppressing the Rinkdolfr Empire. Why would he want to talk to a lowly field officer like me?! Anyhow, I'd better apologize before I end up court-martialed.

“I’m terribly sorry! We’ve become careless after so long on standby.”

“I’d normally give you a lecture on how to talk to a superior officer... but let’s put that aside. I’m transferring the call to the major general. Make sure you don’t speak to him so rudely.”

Lieutenant Colonel Clare disappeared from the screen, and in her place appeared a friendly-looking boy. Our respect for Shu-uichi led us to join Noa. The rest of my unit and I had never seen Kouki’s face, but I knew this boy was Kouki immediately because his face was similar to Miki’s.

“This is Major Martin Achenbach, Captain of the *Odin*!” I declared. “It’s an honor to speak with you, Major General.”

“This is Kouki Arakawa. You don’t have to be so formal. Please be at ease.”

I stood completely still with my back straight.

Behind me, Lucas called out, “Try sitting down with your legs crossed.” I promised myself I’d punch him later.

“Am I right to think that you’re in command of a new type of land attack aircraft, Major?”

“Yes. I am in command of the land attack aircraft, *Odin*.”

This seemed to please Kouki.

He must just want to see what sort of person was using this aircraft he designed, I supposed. But then, the boy on the screen gave me an unbelievable order.

“I’m using my authority as major general to give you the following orders, Major Martin,” he said, still smiling. “Immediately sortie the land attack aircraft, *Odin*. Please give support to the Kingdom Rescue Unit fighting at the Merkava Kingdom front. Based on intelligence from dragon riders dispatched by the Ursna Empire, a large-scale siege engine is expected to appear at the front. Your objective is to destroy the siege engine using the *Odin*.”

“That’s such a great responsibility, and we’re just...” I said before I could stop myself.

If I question the supreme commander at a time like this, I’ll have to listen to a lecture from Lieutenant Colonel Clare. But I can’t understand why such an important responsibility would be given to us. Kouki must have enough authority to sortie every powered suit and tank unit on standby on Noa Island.

He just grinned and said, “You don’t think it’ll be cool? If our ultra-large land-attack aircraft appears and makes Swiss cheese out of the enemy siege engine, I think that’d be awesome! Besides, you must be getting tired of being on standby all the time. I was stuck on the island just recently, so I know how it feels. Think of it as a change of scenery.”

For a moment I was speechless, but I soon came to my senses.

When he says it’s going to be awesome, I guess he means this is our chance to get one over on the other units. They won’t be

calling us good-for-nothing behind our backs anymore if we can pull off this rescue operation.

Lucas must have realized it, too; he'd already started the equipment check. John and Link overheard the conversation as well, and now they were running off to fetch enough flight gear for everyone from the hangar.

After a brief look at my unit, I straightened myself up again and replied to Kouki with a salute. "I promise to make this rescue operation a success. We will destroy this large-scale siege engine, whatever it may be!"

I wasn't sure whether Kouki would be pleased with that response, but he nodded twice and said, "I'm counting on you," before lowering his head to me, even though I was a lowly major. Then he ended the call.

His consideration toward his subordinates reminded me of Shuuichi. My heart began racing at the thought of entering actual combat for the first time in so long.

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"Major, we'll reach the airspace over the battlefield in a little while."

"In a little while?" I shouted. "Give me an accurate time!"

I wasn't happy with the sketchy report from the operator, Link, but the bigger problem was that we couldn't establish communications with the ground units. We tried sending many transmissions at once, but that had caused our main terminal to go down briefly because it couldn't handle the amount of information.

"To be more accurate, we'll be there in two minutes or so," he

said. “Headquarters on Noa Island say there’s no way to contact the ground units right now. What do you want to do?”

I didn’t know. This wasn’t a precision bombing assignment, so we wouldn’t know where to attack without hearing from the ground units first.

Should we remain in the air on standby until we establish communications?

Before I could think it over, the gunner, Lucas, began shouting. “I’ve sighted the large-scale siege engine that was expected to appear! Let’s just start shooting it instead of messing around. Our orders were to smash up their big weapon, so let’s just do it.”

“Wait! We can’t destroy the thing if some of our soldiers are standing near it.”

Lucas continued gazing down the targeting scope while complaining under his breath about not having permission to fire. There was nothing else we could do in this situation.

If we could just inform the ground units of what we were about to do, we could start firing... That’s it! I learned how to deal with this exact situation back when I was in officer training school.

“Link, let’s transmit on all of the frequencies being used in the battle zone. A one-way transmission is good enough.”

Link began operating the *Odin*’s computer system, which included an airborne early warning and control system. Then she gave me the thumbs up. “Can anyone hear me? Can anyone hear me? The noise is really bad, so we’re sending this as a one-way transmission over all frequencies. This is the ground attack aircraft, *Odin*. We’re heading to your location to offer support under the orders of the special major general. Use infrared strobes to

designate units in need of a supporting strike. We will attack the giant until we receive other instructions.”

That'll do. Now the enemy's infantry just needs to move away from the giant's feet. We can use relatively non-lethal rubber bullets to destroy the siege engine, but they could cause a lethal wound if they hit a human directly.

It was going to be difficult to get their fighters away from the siege engine, but I gave orders to my co-pilot, John, with a grin. “Let’s reduce our altitude and fly as low as possible close to the siege engine. The *Odin* is 100 meters long. If we fly five meters above the ground, we’ll scare the empire’s forces and send them running.”

“Understood! I’ll show you what I can do.”

First, we flew in a large circle around the airspace over the battlefield, then we lowered the nose and accelerated as if aiming to collide with the ground. Once we gained enough speed, we flew horizontally at 1,000 kilometers per hour, Mach 0.8, five meters above the ground. I checked using the external cameras that the shock wave and the thunderous sounds from the fuselage shocked the empire’s soldiers and caused them to run away in panic.

But we weren’t finished. We were considered elites among strategic bombing specialists. And this aircraft was the *Odin*—an aircraft designed by the genius, Kouki.

“Link, Lucas, are you both tightly strapped in?” I called. “We’re about to do a somersault!”

“Major, I’ve been meaning to say this to you for some time,” Lucas interjected. “Are you stupid?! This is a bomber. There’s no way you can pull off aerobatic stunts in this aircraaaaaaaah!”

I ignored Lucas and pulled up the nose swiftly. We somersaulted by ascending vertically and flying upside down with the ground and several tanks visible below our heads. I turned on the mic and yelled at the tank unit who were always making fun of members of my unit.

“Take a good look, you tank-operating morons! You’re always laughing and pretending we’re a pizzeria, but we’re the ones who’re gonna take out that giant!”

Once the *Odin* went back to flying normally, there were various objects scattered throughout the aircraft’s interior as a result of our aerobatics, but nobody even noticed. We were all so focused on defeating the opponent that caused all of our tanks to withdraw.

“Lucas, be ready to destroy the enemy siege engine using the rotary cannons. Don’t hesitate now. It could be some time before we see active combat again. Use all twenty cannons to smash the thing to pieces.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lucas peered down the targeting scope to secure his aim, then prepared to fire.

In addition to a 120-millimeter cannon and missile launch systems, the *Odin* was also fitted with twenty 36-millimeter-caliber rotary cannons. These were no big deal compared to tank cannons and the powerful heavy cannons that could be fitted to powered suits, but they had one big advantage over those other weapons.

Even with an autoloader, a tank cannon could only fire about six shells per minute, eight at the very most. A rotary cannon was capable of firing 3,900 shells per minute. And with 20 cannons... some basic math put that at 78,000 shells per minute. Imagine

what that would do to the target. Strong magical barriers were capable of repelling shells from a tank gun, but what if shells continuously hit the barrier in the same spot? We were about to find out.

“Start firing!”

We heard the characteristic whirring sound of the rotary cannons, then the 36-millimeter shells began to strike the siege engine. For the first three seconds, there was a purple light given off as each shell hit, but after five seconds, there was no resistance and a rain of shells had carved away one of the shoulders from its human form.

“The legs! Aim for the legs so it can’t move! We can take our time carving it up once we’ve got it down on the ground.”

Lucas moved the sight down to the legs without ceasing to fire, leaving the upper body of the giant in tatters. The legs were then ripped apart and the giant fell flat on its face. We used this opportunity to rain shells down on it from above. The giant’s human form was no longer recognizable by the time the ground forces were able to contact us.

“This is the commander of the rescue force, Miki Arakawa. Thank you for saving us from a difficult situation. Do you think you could stop firing now? Princess Cassis and the staff here in the CIC are starting to look worried. It could cause problems for us in future negotiations if you overdo it, so now would be a good time to stop.”

I calmed myself and ordered Lucas, who was still firing even now, to stop.

“Understood,” I added, speaking to Miki, the commander of Noa. “Now that the siege engine is destroyed, will you require further supporting attacks?”

“That won’t be necessary. Thanks to you, we have enough time to reorganize. More importantly, the empire’s forces lost their will to fight the moment the giant fell, and now they’re withdrawing. If you have enough fuel remaining, I’d like you to fly over to the northern front force. My son recently contacted me to say that it would boost his fighting spirit if he could see the *Odin*. Would this be possible?”

“Understood! The *Odin* will continue flying north and we’ll perform an aerobatic demonstration over the northern front force.”

I saluted and made sure the call had disconnected before giving John instructions to take us north. Kouki had said that dragon riders had been dispatched from the Ursna Empire. I couldn’t wait to see how they’d react to the sight of this aircraft flying alongside them.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I felt relieved to see the *Odin* flying north.

If they continued attacking the enemy with that brutish attitude (“The legs! Aim for the legs so it can’t move! We can take our time carving it up once we’ve got it down on the ground.”), it would have given the wrong impression to Princess Cassis and the Ursna Empire’s officers, who had been listening to the transmission with me.

Kouki is the one who designed that ridiculous aircraft, so it’s only fair that he should look after its crew, I thought, not wanting to take responsibility myself.

“How does the *Odin* fly?” Elise asked. “It must be 100 meters long.”

“I don’t even know. We built a mockup by carefully following one of Kouki’s designs from the creation program. The mockup was able to fly, so I ordered the engineering department to create the *Odin*. We did find that it won’t work if any of its twelve engines were moved even slightly, but the whole thing is a technological mystery.”

Elise listened wide-eyed, and for a moment, she was lost for words. “I don’t see why you didn’t just ask Kouki how the thing flies.”

“I did, but he won’t tell me. He said, ‘It happened by chance! It’s pure luck that it can fly. I didn’t think it would be possible, either.’ I suppose he’s at that rebellious age.”

Elise didn’t seem to know how to respond. Small wonder, since I’d been letting my parental concerns slip out.

She must be feeling sorry for me because I don't know how to handle my son...

I decided that I'd talk things through properly with Kouki once this war was over. Then I gave the order for the high-speed powered suits on the battlefield to pursue the enemy.

**

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

“Commander, we’re in trouble. The enemy has broken through the arachne women in the left wing.”

“Support them with machine-gun fire! The enemy attacked using their ground dragon unit, didn’t they? We can use full metal jackets instead of rubber bullets. Anything goes as long as no one dies.”

The battle between the Ursna Empire and the Ragille Principality that had started this morning tilted in the Ursna Empire’s favor at first. But Ursna’s main unit crossed the border to pursue an enemy reconnaissance team, and it was surrounded by the main body of the enemy force. Ursna’s main unit was attacked from high ground, leaving them in disarray.

Fortunately, my powered suit unit just barely succeeded in rescuing their main unit, but we hadn’t had enough time to reorganize. All we could do was gradually withdraw while using defensive delay tactics.

“Commander... I think we should completely withdraw so we can regroup,” my adjutant, Louis, suggested with his face covered in dirt.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t something we had time for.

“Noa units might be able to do that, but what about Ursna’s fighters? They can’t withdraw as quickly as we can. And if we completely withdraw now that the enemy has broken through the left wing, Ursna’s forces will be routed— Not now!”

I emptied a rifle magazine to incapacitate a soldier from the principality as he attempted to dive at Louis before my eyes.

The enemy soldier was showered with rubber bullets that knocked him unconscious by a combination of the impact and a high voltage current generated when each bullet struck. He wouldn't be getting up for a while.

"Louis, let's abandon this defense line," I said. "Let's gradually withdraw to the third line trenches made by the centipede field engineers. We can plant claymore mines here to stop the advance of the enemy. And... remove the pin from a stun grenade and leave it wedged under this principality soldier! It's a dirty trick, but it works."

"Understood."

I sent a transmission to the destroyer *Oort* flying over us to check the current situation.

"*Oort*, do you read me? The right wing is withdrawing to the third line. How are Ursna's fighters doing?"

"The Ursna Empire is currently unable to engage in any organized defensive combat because the enemy has broken through its left wing. We are continuing to provide shelling support, but I think it's only a matter of time before the left wing is in complete disarray."

Damn! Looks like we're not the only ones with a fight on our hands. If the Oort uses napalm bombs to burn away the enemy's front line, that would buy time for Ursna to withdraw, but... I had no idea how difficult it would be to fight without killing. I lit the cigarette held in my mouth using a lighter that Kouki had given me as a birthday present, and drew on it deeply before making a decision.

"*Oort*, I'll take full responsibility. Drop tear gas bombs on the left wing and center formations. If they're not organized enough to defend themselves, then let's stop the enemy from advancing,

even if it means taking out our allies.”

“Understood. It will take 30 seconds to prepare the tear gas bombs.”

After the call with the *Oort* ended, I opened a line to all of my subordinates scattered around the battlefield and yelled into the mic.

“All personnel, lower your reinforced exoskeleton visors! The *Oort* is about to start dropping tear gas bombs indiscriminately.”

I lowered my own exoskeleton visor and lay face down on the ground waiting for the tear gas bombs to hit. I looked up and saw the *Oort* circling and targeting this area with its main cannons.

An instant later, flames erupted from the main cannons of the *Oort* as the bombs were fired. I heard the bombs burst open as the battlefield became covered by white smoke.

**

“Sorry to bother you while you’re eating,” Louis said. “We have finished assessing the wounded.”

“Right.”

After the *Oort* provided aerial support by dropping tear gas bombs, we watched both armies fall into disarray as we withdrew from the battlefield. Then we went back to the shuttle just as the Ursna soldiers had left the area so they could regroup.

The principality’s forces had also withdrawn from the battlefield for a while, probably because they were left weakened by the tear gas bombs. It was now evening, and the fighting hadn’t yet resumed.

“More than half of Ursna’s fighters are unable to go on fighting?” I reflected. “Well, at least no one died.”

The information on my terminal’s screen showed that out of the 150,000 members of the Ursna Empire’s army, more than 80,000 were heavily wounded. It was fair to say that the Empire’s army was already defeated. It was hard to imagine how their remaining 40,000 members and 500 soldiers from Noa could attack and break through the principality’s army.

“Isn’t there any good news?” I replied as I put away my terminal.

Louis replied while lighting a cigarette. “Your son’s fleet was able to bloodlessly occupy Asti in just five minutes. Miki’s unit has prevailed over the Rinkdolf Empire’s army, and they are advancing.”

So, Kouki and Miki are doing well despite being beginners, while the professionals are stuck here... This is an embarrassment. I finished eating and threw the empty can of cold beef stew to the ground before turning to my tired-looking subordinates.

“The sun’s about to set. Anyone got any good ideas? We need a way for 40,000 fighters to break through a 200,000-strong enemy army.”

“We should just blow them away with nuclear weapons,” Johnathan suggested. “There’s no antinuclear pact in this world, so Miki could throw some warheads together and BOOM, problem solved.”

Everyone laughed at his joke. They all seemed to agree.

“All right, all right. Let me rephrase that. By some magic, our 40,000 fighters need to break through a 200,000-strong enemy army, *without killing anyone.*”

Everyone stopped laughing and fell quiet. The chewing of food was the only sound in the tent.

This is no good... The way they've stopped smiling shows how low their morale is right now.

When we fought in Afghanistan, we'd been in a similar state, and a string of small mistakes brought the unit to the verge of collapse. I was trying to think of some way to increase morale when the tent door was suddenly folded back and a group of beautiful women entered the tent.

"Hi, everyone! We're the members of the fairy race from the logistics team. We're too weak to take part in the fighting, but we can bring you warm food! Does anyone want some soup?"

"Oooooohh!!"

These idiots had been eating quietly with their heads hanging down, but suddenly everyone was in ridiculously high spirits at the sight of these fairies. Everyone began handing over plates and cups to receive drinks and warm food.

I forgot how simple these guys are. A little encouragement from a beautiful woman is enough to send them charging into an enemy camp.

I felt stupid for having tried so hard to think of a way to raise morale. I lit a cigarette as I looked over the group of morons. Cote's head poking through the entrance to the tent caught my eye. He took a good look at what was going on inside, then he nodded in satisfaction before leaving.

I quickly ran after him. "Cote, wait. Are you the one who called the fairies?"

"Yes," Cote replied. "And not just fairies; I've asked for all the

beautiful races from the Ursna army to visit each tent. I knew how low morale was. These beautiful young women are going to bring them back to life. By the way, Empress Victoria says ‘No touching.’”

With that, he headed off to “check on the other tents.”

It was supposed to be my job to check on how everyone was behaving, but without Clare’s help, I wasn’t sure how to go about it.

Kouki would know how to be a more effective commander in this situation... Though if Kouki was here, we wouldn’t have lost the battle in the first place.

I returned to the tent to find my unit exchanging ideas with newfound enthusiasm.

“What if we were deployed to the front where we could attack the enemy, while the Ursna army strikes the enemy’s main unit from the side?”

“That won’t work. The principality knows we don’t want to kill them. They’ll send wave after wave of fighters to pin us down.”

“What if we strike at night? Once the sun goes down, our superior equipment gives us a major advantage. If a small number of us could take out the enemy’s main camp, that would give us a chance.”

Hm... a night attack, I mused. If we moved around the enemy using night vision gear and then invaded their main camp, we’d have a chance of victory. If only we had enough mobility.

From my pocket I took out a chart, given to me by Empress Victoria, that showed all the different races making up the Ursna army.

Aboard the *Siren*, Clare's Point of View

Now that the fighting was over, only the necessary personnel were on standby in the CIC of the *Siren*, which was lit by a minimal level of lighting.

I glanced at the watch on my wrist; it was 7 PM. The sun was already setting, and both the northern front force where I was assigned and the Kingdom Rescue Unit under Miki's command had concluded their major battles.

Meanwhile, the special powered suit brigade—the unit I was ordinarily assigned to—that had been dispatched to the Ursna Empire, was the only unit still fighting. The battle against the principality's army was ongoing, and it wasn't going well.

"Headquarters, do you read me?" I called. "What is the status of the ghost unit?"

"The fighting has temporarily ceased. A recent report states that the Ursna army has been defeated, and the ghost unit is attempting to defeat the principality's army alone."

The information made my heart skip a beat. *How are my fellow unit members going to break through the principality's army without being harmed? Are they capable of proper intelligence management without me or Elise?*

They were probably resting or reorganizing right now, but I felt lonely knowing they were fighting somewhere far away without me.

Although I wasn't unhappy about being assigned to the *Siren*, I hoped no one would blame me for sighing.

"Kon!" a voice barked.

“Wha?!”

I was categorizing information about the Ursna battle lines that I received from headquarters on my terminal when the sudden sound of Kon’s voice made me jump and turn around.

After I turned to face him, Kon showed what he’d written on the communication card hanging from his neck. “Are you worried about my father?”

“Yes. I can’t help but worry when I think about my unit fighting somewhere far away.”

“I have an idea,” Kon wrote. “There’s a transportation device that my mother made for me. Could you use it to send me to the Ursna battle lines?”

What’s this dragon planning? It seemed highly unlikely that sending Kon to their rescue would affect the state of the battle. But at the same time, some part of me believed it just might be possible for this little dragon.

“I’ll give the order from my terminal to prepare the transportation device,” I said. “I’m counting on you to save everyone in my unit.”

Kon puffed out his little chest as far as he could and grabbed onto me with paper in his mouth. The writing on the paper made me smile. “Leave it to me! I want to show my master how amazing I am. Everyone is always calling my master amazing, but I’m an amazing dragon, too!”

Seeing Kon so determined despite being so small made me want to stroke his head as we walked toward the stern of the *Siren*, where the transportation device was being prepared.

“Are you okay, Kon?” I asked. “I can see you have oxygen. You’re not uncomfortable at all?”

“Kon!”

I checked that Kon was inside the transportation device wearing his specially-made helmet and was breathing normally. He seemed to be comfortable enough.

We were calling it a transportation device, but its construction was no different from a cruise missile, except there was an oxygen canister inside the warhead and enough space for Kon in the center. Rather than landing, the body of the missile was designed to be broken apart by a release mechanism 100 meters above the target. Kon would then descend to the ground without a parachute.

This method had been chosen because Kon told us, “I can handle falling to the ground, though falling 1,000 meters might hurt a little,” and he’d asked for the device to be as simple as possible.

“Kon, could you give this to the commander?” I asked. “It’s just a chart that I came up with for reorganizing the unit, but he might find it useful.”

“Kon, kon.”

Before closing and bolting the lid shut, I petted Kon one last time as he clutched the paper I’d given him to his chest.

I moved over to the launch control device a short distance away and began the countdown so that Kon, listening through an earpiece, would know when to expect the shock of the launch. “Prepare for launch in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1. Launching now!”

The device rapidly accelerated to a speed of Mach 12 within just a few seconds. It was more than any human could have with-

stood. The transportation device soon flew over the horizon and disappeared from view.

I sent a transmission to the commander. “Commander, do you read me? It’s Clare. Kon is heading your way to offer support. He’s carrying a unit organization chart. Please make good use of it.”

After sending my transmission to the commander, I made a wish upon the three moons floating in the night sky. *Please let the cute little dragon riding aboard the missile save my unit.*

Chapter 6: God-Race Ancient Dragon

Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

“So you want to borrow members of the ant and arachne races?” Victoria asked.

“That’s right,” I said. “To make this night attack strategy work, we absolutely need the strength of those two races.”

Now that we’d worked out the details of a night attack strategy, I was visiting the Ursna army’s main tent to ask Empress Victoria for her assistance.

“That’s fine, but what role would you have them serve?” she asked. “Noa’s people have far better equipment and training than my own.”

“But they’ve all got special abilities that we don’t have. For a start, we want to have the ant race carry us on their backs into the enemy’s camp. Is there a species within the ants with a powerful bite and thick armor?”

“Such as the fire death ant? They are few in number, but they are here on the battlefield.”

So they do exist... The fire death ants are probably a demi-human version of the Dinoponera of Earth that Kouki told me about. Those ants have a bite powerful enough to make a human pass out in pain. A scaled-up version of those ants would make a perfect attack vehicle.

“And the arachne race,” I added, “are there any that can pro-

duce tough fibers? We need their cooperation to incapacitate the enemy by getting them caught in their web. If they're like I'm imagining, their bodies will be colored black and yellow."

"You must mean the queen arachne," she said. "There are only two on the battlefield. Will they be sufficient?"

"Yes, that's enough."

All right! There really is a demi-human form of the Joro spider, I thought jubilantly. On Earth, that species makes webs so big they can even capture birds as their prey. They should have no problem incapacitating an enemy platoon.

I requested that the members of the ant and arachne races gather near the Noa tents two hours from now, and I left the Ursna army's main tent.

I was about to call my subordinates so we could gather to discuss our strategy, but then I received a transmission from Clare. It'd been some time since I last heard from her.

"Commander, do you read me? It's Clare. Kon is heading your way to offer support. He's carrying a unit organization chart. Please make good use of it."

Did I hear that right? Why would Kon come here?!

"Clare, how is Kon going to get here?" I questioned. "And what do you expect him to do? I know he's smart, but the only magic he can use is for turning rocks into metals. He'll be useless here."

"He said he has a plan and that I should leave it to him, so I put him in a transportation missile and launched him from the *Siren*. Don't forget that this is Kouki's pet we're talking about. I'm sure he'll be helpful somehow."

I don't know what to say to that. Kouki has put a lot of time into raising him, so maybe he's taught him some sort of special skill. But still. I hate to have little dragons worrying about me. It wounds my pride as a professional.

“In a few minutes, Kon will descend from a point above your location. Please be ready to recover him.”

“Understood.”

I used my terminal to check the destination point of the missile based on the information that Clare had sent to me. Then I went out to recover Kon, taking with me Idiot A and Idiot B, who were trying to flirt with the soldiers from the empire's army.

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After a short while waiting at the destination point, I spotted a ball of fire flying toward us from the west.

That must be the missile that's carrying Kon.

I turned on my night vision goggles and looked up at the sky. The missile broke apart directly above me, and out of it fell Kon.

“Here it comes... here it comes. Maybe I should move forward a little more?” I mumbled to myself as I prepared to catch the dragon like he was a fly ball.

Through my night vision goggles, it looked as though Kon had noticed me. He skillfully guided himself straight toward me through the air using the small wings growing from his back. Kon then rolled into a ball as he descended, and landed in my waiting arms.

After taking a good look at our surroundings, Kon said, “Kon!”

I couldn't help but smile because it felt as though he was saying, "Long time no see!"

Kon passed me a note that he must have written while inside the missile, then he jumped down to the ground and looked up at the sky. I had no idea what he was looking for.

The note read: "I'm here to support you. I have a plan, so leave it to me. On the other side of this piece of paper there's a reorganization chart for the unit that Clare thought up."

Kon has an idea? Well, there's no way he could make things any worse.

Kon was still looking up at the sky when I turned to him and said, "I'll leave it to you." His tail swished back and forth in response.

I sat down so I could carefully study the reorganization chart that Clare had made, but then Kon suddenly roared at the sky.

"GRAAAAAWW!!"

The sound made me jump to my feet in surprise. Kon's tail was swaying back and forth in satisfaction as he turned to face me and held up a card that read "Please hold me."

I picked him up and he continued staring at the northern sky without moving. A minute later there was no change. Five minutes passed and still no change. After ten minutes, I was about to speak up, but then something began to happen in the sky that left me lost for words. Something similar to the magic circles used by the people of Ursna appeared in the sky to the north.

"Commander... what is that?" asked Idiot A.

Why are you asking me? How would I know?! In my arms,

Kon's tail was swishing back and forth violently. *What are these things?* I wondered as more and more magic circles began appearing and covering the entire sky to the north.

"Something is coming out of one of the magic circles," said Idiot B. "A dragon? Commander, there's a dragon emerging from that magic circle. Is this for real?! Is a dragon going to come out of every single one?"

Is that even possible? We must be looking at hundreds of magic circles.

A black dragon that emerged from the largest circle flew over and landed right in front of us. The dragon lowered its head to the ground as if it was here to serve us, and spoke to Kon in my arms.

"It is a great honor to be here in your presence. I am yours to command, Ancient Dragon. Without exception, each and every member of the dragon race has journeyed here to answer your call."

"Kon! Konn, konkon. Kon?"

"I am not worthy of such words," said the black dragon. "As you command. We shall lend our strength to this coalition force you speak of."

The dragon raised its head and then looked in my direction.

"Human, the dragon race is here to assist you as Kon bids us. What would you have us do?"

While the dragon in front of me was speaking, countless other dragons were landing in the area around us. My mind could hardly keep up with everything that was happening.

Kon showed me a new note that he'd written, skillfully held by his tail. "It's time for us to fight back!!"

That note was enough to bring me back to my senses. Kon was becoming almost as impressive as Kouki. I petted him gently before looking to my subordinates and telling them when the night attack would commence.

Ragille Principality Soldier's Point of View

I was eating a meal when I first noticed the commotion that started outside of my tent.

I asked a nearby archer what was happening. “What’s going on? What are you all panicking about?”

“Fool! Didn’t you see the sky to the north? A large army of dragons appeared nearby.”

Dragons? But those despicable lizards live in areas like the northern continent where there’s strong magical energy. There’s no reason for them to be here. I’ll bet these are flying pseudo-dragons that they’ve mistaken for true dragons.

I sneered at the ignorant archer and decided to go back to my evening meal; but before I could return to the tent, a winged creature descended before me from the sky above. It was undeniably a true dragon.

“Gruruu.” The dragon looked right at me and growled menacingly. It began to strike the ground with its tail, leaving indentations in the ground with each strike. Its tail then struck my suit of armor, which had been lying near the tent, crushing it completely flat.

“Uwaaaah!” I cried. *That thing’s going to kill me!*

The threat of death triggered some instinctive reaction that sent me running at top speed toward our main order knights, who were in the process of erecting a tent.

I’m not dead yet. General Ild’s heavy armor knights will be able to deal with that dragon!

I sprinted madly and entered the camp of the heavy armor knights by leaping over some fencing. But the knights I found there were already utterly defeated and lying in a heap in the middle of the camp.

“What’s this? Another weakling come to challenge me?” the black dragon mocked. “I’m finding it rather difficult to keep myself from killing you all.”

“This can’t... Why would Marvelus be here?” I stammered.

There was only one black dragon in this world: the supreme black ruler Marvelus, an SSS-class dragon who reigned over all dragons. No hero had ever been capable of defeating the dragon standing before me.

I was still standing there frozen in terror with a warm sensation radiating out from my crotch, when a white dragon now landed before me.

“I have finished suppressing the humans over yonder, my love. Kon has praised me for a job well done... What is this dirty human?”

“I do not know. I took him for a human brave enough to challenge me, but he wet himself the moment I looked at him.”

This white dragon was clearly his partner, the white queen Lirin. She was an SS-class dragon, and there were countless records of nations that crumbled after inciting her rage.

We’re done for... The principality is finished. There’s no hope for survival with these beasts against us.

I prepared myself for death, but then Marvelus looked at me, his gaze filled with contempt. “Human, we will spare you if you will return to your people and tell them that the coalition has the

support of the dragon race. Go! I will eat you if you are not quick.”

“Eek?!”

I began running without a moment’s thought. On the way, I encountered the archer, who had also lost his nerve and wet himself. Together, we ran as fast as we could toward the frontline fortress where a defense army was garrisoned.

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Late that night, the leaders of the Rinkdolfr Empire and the Ragille Principality were distressed to hear reports of alliance forces being routed. Distress turned to panic when they received reports from two members of the Ragille army.

By morning, the news had spread that the dragon race, led by the supreme black ruler Marvelus and the white queen Lirin, had formally declared against the alliance. It was known to everyone from the castle guards to the common townspeople. It became impossible for either nation to ignore the cries of their people demanding a stop to the war.

Meanwhile, the Capus Kingdom and the Recule Holy State were plotting to bring down the coalition.

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Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After capturing the coastal city of Asti, we headed east and advanced deeper into the Rinkdolfr Empire's territory. At the rendezvous point, located 100 kilometers from the imperial capital, Trieta, I waited for the arrival of Mom and Macho Man.

"Clare, how long will it be until Merkava and Ursna's forces get here?" I asked.

"I'm estimating that Merkava's forces will arrive in five hours, and Ursna's forces will arrive in seven hours. Taking into account the losses from each unit, the coalition force will have to capture Trieta with 120,000 soldiers."

120,000? That's pretty much all of Noa! I realize that the Merkava Kingdom didn't have many soldiers in the first place, but could Victoria lose so many members from Ursna's forces? I heard about Kon going to support them... Didn't he make a difference? I wondered as I reviewed the intelligence I'd received from Clare.

Acatl entered the room carrying food with her. "I made use of the innkeeper's kitchen to prepare us some lunch. Don't worry, I used ingredients taken from our ship."

"Thank you. Sorry for making you go to the trouble."

While Mom was using a ground battleship, we'd gotten off the iceberg carrier and advanced along the ground. We were using inns in occupied towns and villages as makeshift command bases. Naturally, we tried to agree on a fair price with the innkeeper each time we used an inn, but for some reason they always refused to accept our money. It was mysterious.

“This is delicious,” I said. “I didn’t know you were such a good cook, Acatl.”

“Thank you.”

While I was getting my fill of Acatl’s delicious homemade food, Clare informed me of some new information that she received from headquarters on her terminal. “Major General, some members of the dragon race who were fighting alongside the Ursna army have set out for this town and are flying here now. Would you like to greet them?”

“Yes! Of course I would.”

I was excited because this would be my first time seeing a true dragon besides Kon. The flying dragons that Acatl’s team rode weren’t true dragons. Those creatures were actually similar to birds, and were more accurately known as pseudo-dragons. I was disappointed to find that, unlike Kon, the pseudo-dragons didn’t understand human speech. Acatl had told me that true dragons could, so I’d been hoping to meet one.

“Will they fly into the town?” I asked hopefully.

“According to the information I have here, the dragons headed here are Marvelus and Lirin. I’ve asked that they land outside of the town to avoid creating panic.”

So that means they’ll be flying to the grassy field on the western side of town. It’s going to take us a few hours to get there even if we use a vehicle. We should get moving right away so I can see them fly in. I scooped up the entire remains of my lunch into my mouth in one spoonful.

**

“Major General, the suits we sent out as scouts have confirmed

the dragons are on their way here,” Clare said. “They should come into view any minute now.”

I stared wide-eyed at the sky. My head turned back and forth to scan the sky until I noticed a gigantic creature flying toward us from the east. I was certain that it was a member of the dragon race. Once the dragon was close enough for me to see it clearly, he flew in a circle over my head and slowly descended to the ground.

“Gruuu,” the dragon growled.

The growling black dragon was nothing short of impressive, and he certainly looked cool, but...

The dragon would look a lot cooler without Kon sitting on its head.

“Hey, Kon, what’re you doing up there?” I called.

“Graaaaaaw!” the black dragon roared in response. “How dare you, you insolent child?”

For some reason, the dragon was angry. It took a step toward me, and each member of the powered suit team that was there to defend me raised their weapon and disengaged the safety, ready to protect me.

Wait a minute. Why is everyone so on edge?! Did I say something I shouldn’t have?

I was wondering how to remedy the situation as I broke into a cold sweat. But then Kon, atop the dragon’s head, began to speak while swishing his tail.

“Konkon, kon.”

“Yes... Huh?! This insolent—this boy is your master?”

“Kon!”

Kon ignored the black dragon’s surprise, leapt from the dragon’s head, and used his wings to fly into my arms.

....*Kon flew?! I thought, stunned. Kon can fly!*

“Did you learn how to fly?” I asked.

A glowing blue sphere appeared at the tip of Kon’s tail. He threw the sphere up into the sky and it floated in the air for a moment before bursting and leaving text floating in its place.

The text read: “Marvelus here taught me how to fly, and Lirin, the white dragon over there, taught me this magic! And there’s more.”

Kon flapped his wings and rose up out of my arms until he was floating at the same height as my face. He narrowed his eyes and with great effort, adjusted his ordinary “Kon” sound.

“Kon, kokyū... Koukyū, Kouki.”

Did he say my name just now? In my surprise and joy, I suddenly hugged Kon, who was floating there wordlessly, and petted his head.

He tilted his head as he looked at me. When I didn’t react, he started saying, “Kouki, Kouki.” I didn’t know what to say in response, so all I could do was pet him.

The black dragon, Marvelus, soon grew tired of watching us. “Boy, Kon is still young and therefore cannot speak the human tongue. But even so, Kon has practiced growling in different ways. I believe there is something you should say in response.”

Looking around me, I saw it wasn't just Marvelus; Clare and the defense suit team were also looking at me expectantly.

That's right. Kon has been trying so hard. In that case, there's something I really should say to him.

"Kon, I can understand. Thank you."

"Kon!"

Kon energetically wagged his tail before wrapping around the back of my neck to settle himself into his usual position on my shoulder.

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"In that case, was Kon's mother originally a dragon from this world?" I asked the black dragon.

"Indeed," Marvelus replied. "The magic I feel from Kon is similar to Reen's magic. If this was not the case, my kind would not have recognized Kon as being from a superior race, nor would we have answered Kon's call."

After the scene out on the grassy field, Kon told us he wanted something to eat, so we headed back to the inn. Marvelus had taken human form, and was now eating together with Kon.

Marvelus and Lirin thought it best to take human form before entering the town. I was surprised to see the beautiful man and woman they'd become, but what concerned me the most right now was Kon's true nature.

"But wasn't Kon born in a different world?" I asked. "Kon entered a dormant state after being born in another world with no other dragons around, and was then accidentally carried home with me."

“Yes, Kon has told us as much. I cannot prove this, but do you know what species Kon is?”

Kon had told me he was a “god-race ancient dragon.” All I had to go on was some unreliable knowledge from my past life, but I suspected that Kon was the highest ranking species of legendary dragon who reigned over all other dragons. I told Marvelus what I suspected.

Marvelus wiped his mouth with a napkin before continuing. “In that case, do you know what characteristics an ancient dragon has that we lack?”

“I’ve no idea.”

Characteristics? I could say his intelligence is one characteristic, but all dragons are wise and can use powerful magic. I doubt that Kon’s alchemy is the characteristic Marvelus is talking about. I took a sip of the coffee that Clare had poured for me and waited for Marvelus to resume speaking.

“Members of Kon’s species have two special characteristics,” he said. “The first is their ability to cross into other dimensions. I doubt I need explain this to you. You have traveled from another world to this one. I’m sure that was achieved by some magic or scientific technology. The second is more important. Ancient dragons can have relationships with members of other races. I have heard that Reen’s human form was very beautiful.”

“In that case...” I said slowly.

“I’m sure you have guessed already. The proof is in a rumor that was spread among us dragons when I was very young. According to the rumor, Reen had given birth to a child by a human father. When we heard of this, the dragon who was the eldest at the time went to see Reen to learn the truth of the situation. If it was true, the half-human-half-dragon that was born would have

been a weak infant dragon in need of protection from its own kind. But Reen suspected that we intended to harm her child. Boy, if you had been in that position, what would you have done?"

That's obvious: I'd have run away to protect my child, I determined. If I could cross into another dimension, I'd escape into another world so that the other dragons couldn't follow. Kon's mother must've had the same idea when she escaped to the world of the Ackroyd Kingdom.

"It seems you have reached the same conclusion as I did," the dragon said. "As I have said, I have no proof, but Kon's magic is similar to that of Reen, so the most likely conclusion is that Kon is Reen's child."

"In that case, why wasn't Kon's mother there when Kon was born?" I asked. "She was capable of moving safely across dimensions to the world of the Ackroyd Kingdom, after all."

Marvelus placed his hand on his chin and remained silent in thought for some time. Finally, he replied, "After the conception of a child of two dragons, it commonly requires around 800 years until the egg is laid. Another 200 years must then pass before the egg will hatch. Roughly speaking, the whole process takes 1,000 years. This is the reason why there are very few of our kind... but I digress. I suspect that with a weak human as a father, development within the egg would have taken a long time. Such things are unprecedented, so I cannot say for sure, but it is quite possible that Kon's development took several thousand years."

It didn't seem possible that an incredibly powerful ancient dragon could have been killed by humans from the world where Kon had been born. It was more likely that Kon's mother had reached the end of her natural lifespan by the time Kon hatched.

After Reen had traveled across dimensions, what sort of life did the man she'd taken for her husband have? Such tragedy had come from a small misunderstanding, but I believed the two of them had somehow lived happy lives despite that.

* *

Marvelus's Point of View

"Are you sure this is for the best, my love?" Lirin asked.

Having finished eating, we were resting in a room of the inn that had been arranged for us. My wife Lirin had been silent since our parting with Kon.

"What do you mean?"

"That boy... I believe his name was Kouki. You must have realized there is some magic in that boy. It is identical to the magic that flows through Kon. Why did you not tell him?"

"Kon's magic has merely transferred to the boy after the two have been together for so long," I said. "That's not particularly rare. It's no more special than a piece of iron becoming magnetic after being left close to another piece of magnetic iron." I couldn't understand why Lirin asked the question with such concern. "Do you mean to suggest that Reen's blood runs in the boy's veins?"

"Not at all," she said. "Quite the opposite. I was thinking of the father."

"Impossible!" I scoffed. "What a foolish idea. Yes, all living creatures with souls are reincarnated into a new form after death, but if a creature can be reborn in another world, then it can also be reborn as a plant such as a blade of grass. The idea that he might have been reborn as human and reunited with Kon is so incredibly unlikely."

"You are correct, but the probability is not zero," she said. "And Reen was a god-race ancient dragon. She was the nearest thing to a god outside of the heavens. If she had used all of her magic and her life force in earnest, she would have been capable

of magic that could distort logic itself.”

“Impossible! Impossible! *Impossible!* Such an achievement would go far beyond mere magic. That would be a divine miracle.”

“Do you not think it strange?” she retorted. “Reen died before Kon’s birth, and Kon’s attachment to Kouki is far beyond an ordinary attachment between a human and a dragon. Kon spoke to us of Alice as if Alice were Kon’s mother herself. All things considered, the natural conclusion is that those two lovers traveled through time and between worlds to be reunited.”

“That would mean that Reen used her own body as a catalyst for a magic spell on an unthinkable scale...” I said slowly. “Hahaha! I only ever saw her once while I was still young, but to think she would transcend to become a god for that reason alone...”

I didn’t listen to anything further of what Lirin had to say. Reen had not wished to conquer the world, nor had she wished to obtain infinite power.

When I closed my eyes, I could remember her clearly—the legendary dragon who had ascended to the level of a god merely for the sake of a human she loved and their precious child.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

"We will soon arrive at the rendezvous point," Elise said. "Ursna's forces have also arrived there ahead of schedule."

"Looks like we'll be the last ones to arrive." I put down my teacup and looked at the enlarged image on the screen showing the town serving as the rendezvous point. I could see that there were tents set up around the outskirts where Ursna's forces and some Noa soldiers were garrisoned.

There are far too few people here from Ursna. It's just like the reports said. Their main unit must have been crushed after being encircled at the start of the battle.

"Please bring the ship close to the tent that Noa's main unit has set up," I said. "We'll attend a strategy meeting there and begin our assault on the imperial capital."

"Understood."

Our ship stopped close to the tent and we began preparing tea. Shuuichi and Empress Victoria soon came aboard and entered the CIC of the *Alice*. It was perfect timing because there was something I wanted to ask the empress.

"Good work, Shuuichi," I said. "It looks as though you made it through a tough battle."

"It might not have gone so well if the dragons didn't arrived to support us," he said. "My own unit didn't suffer any injuries, but the Ursna army under the empress's command was completely defeated. Once we've captured the imperial capital, they'll need to withdraw from the battlefield."

"My sincere apologies." Victoria bowed her head.

This isn't anyone's fault, I reflected. Her forces are still strong enough to maintain public order, so even if they aren't fighting at the front, they still have a role to play.

“Not at all,” I said. “The Ursna army repelled a 250,000-strong enemy force. That’s quite enough. But there’s something else I’d like to talk to you about, Empress. Does the word ‘ghoul’ mean anything to you?”

“Ghoul? I know of them...” The color drained from Victoria’s face as she answered the question. “Why do you ask?”

The previous night, I learned from a spy who’d infiltrated the alliance forces that the Capus Kingdom and the Recule Holy State were researching a weapon known as a ghoul.

We can't let our guard down now, I reflected. I need to know more about this weapon.

“According to reports from someone who has infiltrated the alliance forces, the alliance force intends to use a ghoul on the battlefield,” I said. “Unfortunately, we have no information about this weapon. Could you tell us about it?”

“...A ghoul is not a weapon of any kind. It is a form of pestilence brought on by a curse. If they do that, they risk destroying their own nations.”

The topic clearly made her uncomfortable. Everyone in the CIC went silent as the empress continued her explanation.

First, a ghoul was definitely a type of monster, but they lacked any intelligence and would simply hunt for prey. The problem was that their prey included any animal that moved. After being bitten by a ghoul, their prey would then become ghouls themselves, thus spreading the infection.

“Is there any cure?” I asked.

“None. The only options are to kill every last one or to hide until they starve.”

The more I learned about the alliance force’s foolishness, the more angry I felt. Even on Earth, there were nations that had created biological weapons, but none foolish enough to create those things without also creating a cure. If a single ghoul was allowed to live, it could spread the infection, resulting in exponentially growing levels of damage. To make matters worse, the disorder caused by the war meant that this continent would lack the resources needed for any systematic effort to contain the infection.

“I can’t imagine what Kouki would say if he heard about this,” I muttered.

“Why are you worrying about me?”

Hearing a voice behind me, I turned around in surprise. Kouki was looking at me curiously with Kon perched on his head.

Oh no... If Kouki heard what we were just discussing, he’ll use all of his power to kill the leaders of the alliance force.

The other CIC personnel must have also reached the same conclusion. They now had another reason for being speechless as they gazed at Kouki.

“Kou, how much did you hear?” I asked uneasily.

“The whole thing. So let’s decide what we’re going to do about it.”

Kouki began thinking with his index finger resting against his chin. I looked away from him briefly to look at Shuuichi. Shuuichi understood what it was I was trying to signal to him. He moved

around to get behind Kouki, ready to restrain our son at any time. If Kouki said, “Get my powered suit ready, because I’m going out to kill them,” we would just have to confine him to this room until the matter was resolved.

Eventually, Kouki checked something using his terminal and said, “Victoria, a ghoul’s weak point is its head, right?”

“You know of them?” she said. “Indeed, the head is the weakest point.”

“Clare, please bring me a map of the area around the Capus Kingdom,” he ordered. “Make it a satellite image, if possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

I was surprised to see Kouki was already accustomed to giving out commands.

“Mom, how quickly can you create a thermonuclear weapon?” he asked me.

“Never,” I said. “There is a pact prohibiting them, so even if I returned to the Hakone base, we don’t have the materials.”

“Seriously? Burning everything away with nuclear weapons is standard practice when there’s this kind of biohazard or pandemic... This makes things difficult.”

I didn’t understand what Kouki was saying. *Standard practice? Nuclear weapons? And how could he possibly know that a ghoul’s weak point is its head? That reminds me... He also knew a lot about sandworms and elves. Could he have brought back something from the relic without me noticing?*

Kouki’s words left me with a lot of questions.

Clare then returned with a satellite image and spread it out on a desk. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Major General. This is the satellite image you requested.”

“Thank you, Clare. I’m sending some data to everyone’s terminals so you can all see it.”

I took a look at my own terminal to see for myself. The data described in detail some effective strategies, tactics, weapons, etc., for dealing with ghouls. It was no exaggeration to say that this was a detailed solution to the problem itself. But the name of the file he sent was a major cause for concern.

“Kou, I know you won’t give me a straight answer if I ask how you’ve managed to describe everything in so much detail without any experience or training, so I won’t ask. But why would you name the file ‘What to Do If Mom Makes a Zombie Virus – Part 3’?!”

It made me wonder what kind of person Kouki thought I was.

I’ll have to talk this over with his girlfriend. Alice is such a sweet girl; I’m sure she’ll help correct Kouki’s image of me.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Kou, I know that you won't give me a straight answer if I ask how you've managed to describe everything in so much detail without any experience or training, so I won't ask. But why would you name the file 'What to do If Mom Makes a Zombie Virus (Part 3)'?!”

Because that's exactly what the file is, I thought. The idea was that Mom might end up creating a zombie virus at some point. And those viruses always escape containment in some accident. So we were going to need this emergency protocol manual when the time came! It was kind of a joke, but now it looks like we're actually going to use it for the first time.

After silently reading through the data, Macho Man asked, “Kouki, what's a 'zombie'? Is it some sort of code name?”

I thought the concept of a zombie would be too complicated for a gorilla to understand, so I dumbed it down a little. “If a virus is incredibly infectious and it makes changes to the host's body, I call that a 'zombie virus.' And anything infected with the virus I call a 'zombie.’”

“Major General, I can't help but notice that this file is part 3. Is there more?” Clare asked.

“Of course. The whole thing is 27 parts covering every possible scenario.”

Clare was staring at me, lost for words.

Heh. I haven't been sitting around wasting time since getting reincarnated. I might not be a genius like my mom, and I might not have incredible skill on the battlefield like Macho Man, but

I've put my knowledge from my past life to full use to prepare for this situation. Come to think of it, this might be the first time I've really done something useful for my mom.

Naturally, I considered barricading yourself in a supermarket as a means of surviving a zombie apocalypse to be the height of folly. A hardware store was the best option. That way you'd have weapons and everything you need to barricade yourself in, such as the tools and sandbags, right there. There'd also be instant ramen, or dog food in the worst case scenario, that you can eat to keep yourself alive.

"Some of this is really specific," Macho Man said. "I understand rules like, 'Never go out alone to investigate the source of a strange sound.' But why is 'Never use a helicopter to escape' a rule?"

"Because they crash."

Macho Man looked confused by my response.

"Any helicopter used to escape will always crash," I explained. "Even if there's no real reason for it to crash, it'll crash because of mysterious engine problems. Helicopters have to be avoided entirely."

I'd also written things like, "Take extreme caution when entering underground tunnels," and "In each group of people, there should always be at least one person looking out at the group's rear."

I'll have to go over the details with Macho Man and the others who'll actually be basing their actions on the manual. But before that, we need to prioritize capturing the imperial capital 100 kilometers from here. There's nothing else we can do until we've done that.

“Let’s come up with our zombie countermeasures later,” I said. “First, let’s quickly capture the imperial capital.”

“Quickly?” Mom replied. “Kou, do you realize that the imperial forces have set up defenses that are virtually impregnable? It’s not that easy.”

“Sure it is. If my strategy goes well, we can quickly render the imperial capital powerless without injuring anyone. But I’ll need everyone to cooperate. Listen...”

I pushed Mom’s objections to the side, and told everyone in the CIC about the plan I thought of the night before. At first, everyone listened in astonishment, but they all began to smile as I got into the details.

“Kouki, I think you might be crazy,” Macho Man said. “But if you can pull this off, it’ll really be something.”

“Very well,” Victoria said. “I must change into another dress. And I must prepare one for Lirin.”

Now that I had approval from Victoria and the Noa military department’s chief executive, Macho Man, we could make the strategy official. My only concern was whether I’d be able to keep my nerve long enough to follow the strategy through to the end. The entire coalition force would be watching my every move. I didn’t want to embarrass myself.

I asked Clare to pour some coffee so I could energize myself. Then I made a mental note to go to the bathroom first before leaving, so I wouldn’t have any accidents while carrying out the plan.

Joachim's, Knight of the Rinkdolfr Empire's Imperial Guard, Point of View

It was evening and the coalition force was drawing near the imperial capital. We stood outside the capital's mighty gates awaiting the enemy's arrival. The men around me didn't know the particulars and were optimistically saying that our opponents were likely dwarf-sized demi-humans. But I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

To calm my nerves, I touched the scarf around my neck that had been given to me by my wife before I set out. Then we saw the giant object approaching from ahead.

“Archers! Ready!”

At my command, the archers positioned behind me made themselves ready to unleash their arrows at any time. The tension left me with a lump in my throat as the giant object stopped, leaving a good distance between itself and the city gate.

“Aren't they going to attack?” I muttered to myself.

Then I realized that a black dragon and a white dragon were flying above us. They were Marvelus and Lirin, I was certain of it.

So the rumors were true. They really are cooperating with the coalition force! How are we going to get out of this alive when we're up against legendary beasts that not even heroes have ever been able to defeat? The dragons clearly have the upper hand! I wonder why they haven't attacked us yet.

“Do you think they're here to intimidate us?” my aide asked, but I doubted it.

I noticed that two people emerged from the giant object and

were walking toward us at a leisurely pace. The dragons also began to slow down as if trying to match the pace of these two people.

“All units!” I gave another instruction. “Do not attack. Something isn’t right.”

As I watched the two people approach, I noticed one of them was a beautiful woman in a charming attire.

The other was different entirely. It was unusual for a beautiful woman to be on the battlefield, but the other was clearly a young boy wearing what appeared to be a military uniform.

They continued walking slowly toward us until they were just ten meters away.

“You. The well-dressed knight. Yes, you. Are you in command of this rabble?” the boy asked me.

“Y-Yes.” The boy spoke with such an intimidating air that I found it difficult to keep my voice from trembling. “Who are you? Are you with the coalition?”

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAW! How dare you speak to His Majesty the Devil in this manner?!” Marvelus had been silent, but now he was growling at me in rage at what I said.

The sight was enough to cause the archers to unleash a volley of arrows at the dragon, but with a wave of Lirin’s tail, a strong magic barrier appeared and repelled every arrow.

We looked at Marvelus with a feeling of despair and terror.

“Marvelus, stop,” the boy said in a calm, completely emotionless voice.

“But Your Majesty! Such disrespect is—”

“Marvelus, I said stop. I won’t repeat myself.”

Upon hearing the order, Marvelus lowered his head until his chin touched the ground. It was clear to see that these beasts that had so violently destroyed numerous nations were now in this boy’s service. I could not help but be overwhelmed by despair.

Is this some joke? If the boy has subjugated Marvelus, he can only be... “A demon,” I whispered to myself as I looked at the boy.

Marvelus became enraged once more and was about to attack. But then the boy made a slight motion with his left arm. That was all it took. With that small gesture, Marvelus disappeared from view in an instant.

There was some commotion as we tried to understand what had happened. Then there was the sound of a heavy object falling to the ground. I was almost too afraid to look, but there I saw Marvelus lying on his side, not moving at all.

“I told the fool that I do not repeat myself. Lirin, is he dead?”

“He is of a high race. I’m sure he will live. But Your Majesty, I’m more concerned about your hand. I should have dealt with Marvelus myself to spare you this trouble.”

Lirin had taken human form and was now stroking the boy’s hand with a look of concern.

Doesn’t she care about Marvelus?! Was that legendary dragon defeated in a single blow? I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The boy smiled as if this was nothing unusual.

“I would like to speak with the emperor of this nation,” he said. “If you refuse, an all-out attack on the imperial capital will

commence immediately. Wouldn't it be tragic if your citizens were caught up in the fighting?"

This scoundrel! Is he holding our citizens for ransom?! But the boy asked to speak with the emperor. Rather than asking for Lord Dolne, he asked for the emperor himself. Does he know the truth about this nation?

"You would like to see the emperor, and not Lord Dolne?" I hesitated.

"Indeed. My business is with the emperor."

The boy spoke with such confidence that it kindled faint hope within me that he might somehow change this nation.

**

Once the sun had set completely, the messenger I sent running to the castle returned to the front line to inform me of the emperor's response. It was too dark to see clearly, but I understood the response already from his cheerful face.

"Captain! The emperor has agreed to grant an audience."

"And what of Lord Dolne?"

"He will also be in attendance."

Lord Dolne would more than likely serve as a hindrance, but while the messenger was gone, I'd spoken with the boy—His Majesty the Devil—and I felt as though he'd be capable of making the discussion productive.

The devil was drinking tea together with the beautiful woman atop Lirin, who had resumed her dragon form.

“Your Majesty, it appears that Emperor Karl is ready to receive you,” Lirin said.

“Very well. Lirin, let us down.”

As the devil stepped to the ground, Lirin took human form once again and stood beside him. I called for a carriage to take the three of them to the castle, and the carriage arrived together with a group of Lord Dolne’s knights, who were on foot.

Why are they here? I wondered as I studied the knights.

“Only the coalition forces can approach the castle,” one of the knights announced. “His Majesty the Devil and the white queen are permitted to approach, but I must ask your companion to wait here. Have no fear. We’ll take good care of her.”

The vulgar grin on the face of the knight made me instinctively reach for my sword. *These filthy mercenaries are knights in name only! With these thugs here, the empire has no future.* These men had no interest in the fate of the empire. It made me sick to look at them. Before I could draw the sword at my waist, the devil suddenly spoke to the mercenaries.

“You’ll take good care of her?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Please leave everything to us. Allow us to entertain her.”

The devil thought for some time about the mercenary’s response.

Does he truly intend to leave her behind? I thought with trepidation. *No good can come of it.*

Before I could warn him to think carefully, I realized that the devil was suppressing his laughter. “Victoria, since they’ve so

kindly offered to entertain you, I'll leave you here. Use this opportunity to introduce yourself."

The beautiful woman nodded in response to the devil and made her self-introduction to the mercenaries with a charming smile. "I am Victoria Loa Ursna, Empress of the Ursna Empire. It's a pleasure to meet you, humans. This entertainment you speak of, what do you have in mind?"

"Well, we're..."

This was enough to cause the mercenaries to lose their composure, but I was equally naïve. Now that I thought about it clearly, I realized a boy that was known as "the devil" would not have been traveling with ordinary people. I frantically began to think of a way to deal with this situation that was already beyond my mental capacity, but it was Lirin who came to our rescue.

"Your Majesty, I think we had better bring Victoria with us. She has detailed knowledge of human society that will be needed during our discussion."

"If Lirin says so, then I must agree. Joachim, can you grant her permission to come with us?"

"Yes, very well. Please forgive the rudeness of our knights."

I could see that the devil, Lirin, and even Victoria were laughing to themselves as they boarded the carriage. It was as though they had fully anticipated the confrontation that just occurred, but I truly did not want to believe so.

As we traveled toward the castle, no one spoke for some time. Then the devil said something softly, as if talking to himself. "It's too dark to see very well, but this looks like a good town. I'd prefer if this town wasn't destroyed in the war."

His words sounded sincere, and it made me think about why the devil himself had appeared on the front lines. The empire already lacked enough strength to crush the Multi-Race Coalition Force. The only thing that kept us fighting was our stubbornness and the desire to protect the empire. The low-ranking soldiers did not know it, but the coalition had cut off all of the empire's supply lines, and even without an offensive strike, they could incapacitate us by continuing this siege.

The devil must know this... so why would he show himself to us at this late stage? Could it be the devil is here to change the empire, just as I hoped?

"Captain, we have arrived," announced the coachman, bringing me back to my senses.

I had been lost in thought for some time. I stepped out of the carriage first to ensure the area was safe and that knights were there to meet us. In front of the castle gates I saw my second-in-command, Clemence. I took care not to arouse suspicion as I approached him.

"Clemence, are the preparations complete?"

"Yes, sir! Everything is in order."

"Very well. This will be an important meeting that decides the fate of the empire. Their safety is your top priority."

I pretended to pat him on the shoulder as I leaned in and whispered to him, "Make sure you're ready. You know what I'm talking about."

Clemence gave a slight nod, and I turned back to the carriage. The devil had already climbed out of the carriage and was stretching with his arms high above his head. I admired him for having the courage to appear so defenseless before the main castle of an

enemy nation.

I informed the devil we were ready to enter the castle.

**

As we were walking through the inside of the castle, the devil stopped to admire the courtyard.

Could there be something here that caught his eye? I wondered. I rarely entered the castle these days, but memories of the place were coming back to me.

The devil pointed out a single tree planted in the courtyard and asked, "What are those birds resting on the tree? I've never seen this species before..."

The birds he was pointing at were native to the eastern continent. Those birds were a rare species that had been given to us by the principality on the birthday of the empress. I shared this information with the devil, and he nodded before walking on. He continued to sneak glances at the birds as he walked.

Perhaps he has an interest in pet animals, I mused as I guided him to the room where the discussion would take place.

"The emperor is waiting for you within this room," I told him when we arrived.

"Very well."

Without hesitating, he opened the door and boldly entered the room. I followed behind him and saw a pale-faced Emperor Karl and a dissatisfied-looking Lord Dolne seated and waiting.

Before I could introduce the two of them to the devil, the boy walked over to a bench and sat there relaxed with his legs

crossed.

As expected, Lord Dolne became red in the face at the sight of the devil's behavior.

"You were not given permission to sit!" he yelled. "And you've brought your women with you to the battlefield. You must be feeling quite confident, demi-human!"

"I did not come to swear fealty," he said calmly. "I need no permission from you for anything. Perhaps you thought I was here to yield to the empire? But you can't possibly be that foolish. And I am indeed quite confident, particularly compared to the small nation on the verge of losing this war."

"How dare you mock the empire?!" Lord Dolne yelled in rage. Saliva flew from his mouth.

The devil sighed and turned to Emperor Karl. "Emperor Karl, I had asked to speak with you. I do not recall asking to speak with a hairy beast. Can nothing be done about this eyesore?"

"I am sorry my retainer is so lacking in manners. But Lord Dolne is... my most loyal retainer, and I value his opinions. So I must ask..." Emperor Karl bowed his head to the devil as he spoke.

Devil, please, realize what's happening! The empire is being controlled by Lord Dolne. The empress and their son are imprisoned, and we have no way to oppose Lord Dolne as long as he holds the imperial seal. I bit my lip as my body trembled in frustration.

The devil looked at me and then at the emperor. He nodded as if in agreement. "I think I understand the situation. Lord Dolne, allow me to clearly state the coalition force's requests. One: The Rinkdolfr Empire must sign a ceasefire agreement prepared by

the coalition force. Two: All slaves besides those that were enslaved as punishment for some crime must be released immediately. Three: All demi-humans living in the empire must be formally recognized as citizens of the empire. Four: You must allow coalition force soldiers to be garrisoned in five of your major cities, including the imperial capital. That is all. If you do not accept, a full-scale attack will commence in the morning.”

This is absurd! Those conditions amount to little more than an unconditional surrender! There’s no way they could ever be accepted. Why would the devil present us with such absurd conditions? Perhaps I was wrong about him. Does he merely wish to trample over foreign nations?

Those demands, calmly stated by the devil, made Emperor Karl look so pale that I thought he might faint. Lord Dolne opened his mouth as if to speak, but even he was lost for words.

“Your Majesty, perhaps you should inform him of what we offer in return for meeting our demands?” Lirin suggested to the devil with a smile. “He has gone pale in the face.”

“Yes, you are right.”

They’re offering something in return?

I felt something similar to resignation as the devil explained what they were offering. As I listened to the details, the shock I felt grew even greater than what I felt when I’d heard his demands.

“In return for accepting these conditions, the coalition force will permit the continued existence of the imperial family. The coalition force will also provide funds for quelling the turmoil your society faces after releasing the slaves. You will have fewer manual laborers after releasing slaves engaged in such work, so we would like those funds to be used to employ the former slaves

while paying them a fair wage. Lastly, if coalition forces garrisoned in your cities violate the empire's laws, they may be punished according to those laws. They need not be granted extraterritoriality."

The emperor's energy appeared to return to him when he heard these exceptionally favorable conditions, and it gave me hope. If the imperial family could continue to exist, then this was a chance for the empire to rebuild. And if we didn't grant them extraterritoriality, we could even convince our allies that we had never been completely defeated.

I advised the Emperor to accept the coalition's conditions, but Lord Dolne flatly disagreed.

"We reject these conditions! The empire can still fight. We will resist demi-humans until the very end! Joachim, do you call yourself human?!"

"Lord Dolne! Please open your eyes," I pleaded. "Do you wish to lead the empire to destruction?"

My advice merely enraged Lord Dolne further. He told us that he would gather his soldiers, and then left the room.

Unless he's stopped, Lord Dolne will send out our young knights alone to attack the coalition force. That would mean the end of the empire, the lives of its citizens, and everything I was meant to protect.

I hesitated for a short while as I ran my hand over the scarf given to me by my wife. Then I made my decision and gave orders to the imperial guard using a magic pendant I wore at my chest.

"Execute the plan as discussed. Make haste. Everything must be settled before the main force in front of the city gate can return."

“Understood.” The response from the magic item sounded reassuringly confident.

I drew near to the emperor, who was still too confused to grasp the situation.

“Joachim, what is happening?” he asked. “What is this plan you speak of? Why is there such commotion in the castle?”

Forgive me, Emperor. I must do this to restore the empire to its rightful state and to protect the empire’s citizens and the imperial family.

I made my apology in my heart; I would never be able to speak the words aloud. Then I drew the sword at my waist and pointed the tip at Emperor Karl.

“Sit down, Emperor. This is a coup d’état.”

The emperor looked so dismayed that I wasn’t able to look him in the eye. I remained silent and turned my back to him before locking the door so no one could enter the room.

**

I sat in the seat that had been occupied by Lord Dolne, and listened to a report from one of my men. It was clear that the plan was going smoothly.

“Captain, we have succeeded in capturing all of the important nobles.”

“Have them confined to the castle as hostages. Make sure none of them are harmed.”

Our first goal had been accomplished. With the nobles confined to the castle as hostages, the empire’s main forces would be

unable to act after returning from the front lines. They would simply add to the chaos.

Next, they need to check on the confined empress and her son. Have they been able to find them? I wondered. I lit a cigar and folded my arms while I waited. The report I was waiting for soon arrived.

“The empress and the prince have been rescued! They’re exhausted but safe.”

“Good work. Bring them to this room immediately.”

I unlocked the door and waited for my men to bring in the empress and the prince. I heard the sounds of footsteps running through the corridor outside, then my men burst into the room, their faces hidden by cloth.

“We have brought the empress and the prince. Unfortunately, we failed to capture Lord Dolne. We did, however, locate the imperial seal in his quarters. We can give it to you now, Captain.”

“It’s unfortunate that he escaped, but this is good enough. Return to your posts.”

I took out some documents that I’d prepared for formalizing a judgment of treason, and, using the imperial seal, I stamped each document in turn. The Empress appeared suspicious and tried to talk to me, but I completely ignored her and continued the work. When I stamped each document, the last thing I needed to do was confirm one final thing with the devil, who remained seated throughout the ordeal without losing his composure.

“It is now I who makes decisions on behalf of this nation,” I said. “If I sign the surrender agreement, will you abide by the conditions you mentioned earlier?”

“Of course. The surrender agreement will be recognized as the will of the empire, not of any individual. It does not matter who applies the imperial seal.”

“Very well. Show me the documents.”

The devil took some folded papers from his pocket and passed them to me. The documents were carefully written in the language of the empire, and the conditions they described were the same as those the devil had explained to us. I carefully checked them three times over to ensure there were no conditions that would be disadvantageous to the empire, and I applied the imperial seal.

“Joachim, why would you betray the empire?” the empress asked me in distress. “I always believed that you would remain loyal to the empire no matter what happened...”

I am loyal to the end, Empress, I thought. That is why I have no other choice. This is all for the sake of the empire and the imperial family. I would gladly commit treason to protect both.

I put all of my emotions to one side and thrust the surrender agreement, now bearing the imperial seal, back at the devil.

“It’s now official,” he said. “The coalition force will immediately suspend all military action against the Rinkdolfr Empire. What is the status of Lord Dolne now that he has fled? Should he be treated as a noble of the empire or as a traitor?”

“Lord Dolne is wanted as a traitor and a disloyal retainer. Please treat him as such.”

The devil nodded and then suddenly rose to his feet and moved to the window to look outside. “I think the sun is about to rise.”

He's right; there's a faint glow in the sky. Everything happened so quickly after the devil's arrival in the imperial capital. This could be the last time I ever see the sun rise. I regret allowing Lord Dolne to evade capture, but I trust Emperor Karl and Clemence to deal with the matter.

Having made my decision, I was about to give my last order using the magic item, but the devil stayed me with his hand.

“If Lord Dolne has fled the imperial capital, where do you expect he'll go now?”

“I expect he'll head north, where there are fewer guards. We are searching for him, but I fear he may have already escaped the capital. Sadly, I expect he'll escape to the Recule Holy State.”

“I see. Take a look at this and tell me if you still think he can escape.”

I looked in the direction that the devil was pointing, and at first, I saw nothing. But then, as the sun rose, I saw countless flags waving in the wind in the grassy fields to the north.

What army is this? The coalition's main force is positioned in front of the capital, and the land north of the empire has magical energy levels that are too high for even demonic races to withstand. How could there be a force approaching the capital from that direction?

I watched these mysterious warriors as they continued their slow approach. Finally, the flags they were bearing came clearly into view, and I couldn't help but cry out in shock.

“The Merkava Kingdom's forces?! Impossible. How can they be bearing the flag of the order of iron knights?”

“While you were risking your life for the future of the empire,

the members of the order of iron knights were risking their lives by trekking across the mountain range to the north. It might be meaningless now that the empire has surrendered without any attack taking place, but I have received a report from the iron knights stating that they have captured a noble fleeing from the capital. I'm happy to tell you that the description they gave sounds a lot like Lord Dolne."

In that case, I truly have no regrets. I felt as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders as I used the magic item to give out my next command. "The plan has been executed successfully. You know what to do next."

"...Understood. It has been an honor to fight by your side, Captain."

I took the sword that I wore at my waist and placed it down on the table. Then I took a flask that I always carried with me from my pocket, and I drank the contents. The burning sensation of the strong alcohol in my throat was pleasant. I grabbed the scarf as I listened to the sound of footsteps running through the corridor.

My men are here for me... It's a shame I won't be able to praise them for acting so quickly just like we trained.

The door burst open and Clemence entered the room together with the imperial guard, all fully armed.

"Joachim, you traitor! As you can see, I've taken back control of the imperial guard. Your plot has failed. All that remains is for us to deal with you as the traitor you are."

Clemence... why do you look as though you're about to cry? You're going to make the other knights suspicious. We decided on this long ago. If our coup d'état was successful, we would eliminate every disloyal retainer and then the imperial guard

would hold me, and only me, responsible for the plot.

The shame I've brought on the imperial guard can only be washed away if the imperial guards themselves are quick to punish me. You wore cloth over your faces so no one would know you were part of the coup d'état. Don't make that meaningless.

Clemence's face was still contorted as if he were about to cry. He pointed his sword toward me and asked, "Have you any last words?"

"None."

I've nothing left to say... I trust the future of the empire to you, Clemence. Now follow through with your duty as a member of the imperial guard, sworn to protect the emperor.

I was ready. I nodded as I looked in the face of this superb knight of the imperial guard who I'd once taken under my wing. But for some reason, it wasn't Clemence who objected; it was the devil.

"I don't want it to end like this! Louis, Johnathan, now's the time. Please move to Plan C."

As soon as the devil shouted this, two humans dressed in black appeared and pointed their weapons at my men.

"Don't move! We're a special forces team of the coalition force. Under the conditions of our ceasefire, the imperial capital is currently under control of the coalition force. If you oppose us, we will regard this as a return to hostilities. Lay all of your weapons down."

I couldn't understand how these two people had appeared, but everything would be for nothing if the fighting was to resume

here. I signaled my men to have them put their weapons down, and then I turned to the devil to ask what was happening, but one of the two men spoke before I could.

“You’d better brace yourself. Sorry in advance.”

I was still unsure what he meant when there was a great crashing sound and my body was thrown against a wall. I collapsed, unable to move from the pain and the shock. Then one of the men dressed in black approached and put his hand to my neck. He held me like that for several seconds before turning to the devil and shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, sir. One member of the empire’s army has been shot dead after failing to comply with an order to lay down his weapons.”

“Wow, that’s really bad luck, but we didn’t have any other choice. Emperor Karl, I’d hate for things to end this way, so we’ll pretend this didn’t happen. By the way, the weapon they shot him with is top-secret. Not even members of the coalition force know about that thing. I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to take Joachim’s body with us.”

I don’t understand what the devil is planning. And why has his voice suddenly changed? He sounded so intimidating until a while ago, but now he’s talking more like a young boy. Which is his true nature?

I groaned in confusion and pain. One of the men dressed in black heard me and crouched in front of me. “We can’t have dead men talking. I’m giving you something for the pain. Now go to sleep for a while.”

He jabbed something into my thigh and I felt the pain rapidly fade away. The devil and a confused-looking Clemence became blurred in my vision as I gradually slipped into unconsciousness.

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

"Ngh... Uugh." Joachim lay groaning on the bed in front of me. The anesthetic we'd given him in the castle had finally worn off.

Joachim opened his eyes and looked around the room before asking me, "Where am I?"

"You're aboard the land battleship *Alice*, which is serving as the flagship of the Multi-Race Coalition Force. This is the central sick bay. Basically, it's a place where we treat injured people."

"Landed battleship?" he asked, looking stunned. "What do you mean?"

There was something much more important that I needed to talk to Joachim about. Soon after he'd passed out, we took him out of the imperial capital. Along the way, we also visited his home to extract his family.

When I charged into the house after Louis and Jonathan, the sight of his wife on the second floor left me speechless.

"Joachim, we went to extract your wife on our way back from the castle," I said. "We found her on the second floor..."

"Did something happen to her?"

"No, she's fine. It's just... your wife is a cat sith! I was so shocked at first that I didn't know what to do. Your wife's ears prick up when she's in a good mood and droop down when she's sad, right?"

"Huh? I suppose they do... Is that important?"

Of course it's important. It couldn't be more important. She

has real-life cat ears!

His wife was shocked when we forced our way into the house, and her ears had twitched in alarm. But she came with us calmly after Lirin had shown her Joachim and explained what was going on.

After we got back to the *Alice*, I asked Cote for some matatabi sticks, since I knew he kept a cat. I planned to give them to Joachim's wife, but my mom wouldn't let me.

"What will become of the empire?" Joachim asked nervously.

"It'll be managed by the coalition force for a while, just like I explained at the castle," I said. "Then we'll gradually hand back control. I don't know what'll happen after that. It's up to the people of the empire to decide whether the empire changes or goes back to how it was."

"I see."

Joachim closed his eyes as if he was thinking about something. I was sure he was worried about what future awaited the empire that he risked his life to protect. It made me want to cheer Joachim up somehow, so I tried to think of a topic that would lift his spirits.

After some thought, I remembered something and decided to share it with him. "A long time ago, there was an island nation at war with the world. That nation wasn't as powerful or as technologically advanced as the other nations. The people of that nation fought to the end with all of their strength, but were eventually defeated by the seemingly infinite armies and new weapons of their enemies. This tragic war used every last drop of the nation's strength, and it's said that more than three million people died by the time the war was over. After the war, their spirit was broken and the nation was occupied by one of their enemies."

“What happened to that nation?”

“They promised they’d never repeat the mistakes they made in the past. More than sixty years after the war, those who lost their lives to defend that nation weren’t forgotten, and the nation grew until it stood shoulder-to-shoulder with other great nations. Their technology in particular became world-renowned.”

“Will the same be possible for the empire?” he asked.

“I’m sure of it. If everyone joins hands and cooperates, the empire can absolutely be born anew.”

Joachim nodded as he gazed at the ceiling.

It looks like I’ve given him hope. Things will be fine, Joachim... I’m sure the Empire will be reborn. You have our co-operation, so there’s no need to worry.

I was about to walk out of the sick bay, but then I stopped.

“I just remembered. There was a message from Emperor Karl.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked me to tell you, ‘Thank you.’”

I didn’t know what the deeper meaning of those words was. But I was sure the true meaning wouldn’t be lost on the captain of the imperial guard who had protected Emperor Karl for so long.

Joachim’s stern face became contorted. “Guh... Emperor... I’m just happy to... to have been able to serve my emperor.”

As Joachim began to cry, I decided to quietly leave the sick bay to give him some time alone.

Chapter 7: The Path to Ending the War

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

After leaving the sick bay, I felt like I needed to collect my thoughts, so I went to my room and sat down in a chair with my eyes closed.

While I was thinking, someone knocked at my door, and I told them to come in.

“Pardon me.” Clare entered the room looking somewhat low-spirited.

Did something happen? I wondered. Kon, who was curled up my lap, was also anxiously looking at my face and Clare's.

“Clare, what's wrong?” I asked.

“Although we haven't confirmed it yet, we've received intelligence suggesting the Capus Kingdom and the Recule Holy State have begun using ghouls on the battlefield,” she said. “Miki would like to talk to you about it.”

“Okay. I'll go see Mom in a little while.”

I closed my eyes again and went back to thinking, but Clare looked as though she wasn't going to leave the room.

I opened my eyes again and asked her, “Is there something else?”

“I'm sorry but... it would be best if you went to her as soon as

possible.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Clare! I’ve already acknowledged what you said. If it was urgent, Mom would contact me directly. There are things I need to think about. Could you leave me alone for a while?”

“I-I’m terribly sorry! Forgive my rudeness.”

I hadn’t meant to talk so harshly. Clare left the room looking somewhat flustered.

As the sound of Clare’s footsteps faded into the distance, I sighed and buried my face in my hands. *What am I doing? I may have a lot on my mind, but I can’t take it out on Clare. I’ll apologize to her later...*

“Hey, Kon.” I looked down at my lap and spoke, as if talking to myself.

“Kon?” he replied, as if to say, “What is it?”

I decided I should share my thoughts with Kon because I knew he wouldn’t tell anyone else about any troubles I shared with him.

“We protected Joachim, didn’t we? It made me think. Do we really need to continue this war? I’ve heard from Joachim’s wife and a Merkava knight how the various countries in the alliance treat demi-humans... I mean, people from different races. Hearing what they had to say made me wonder what this war is all about.”

I glanced down at Kon, and he was urging me to continue with a serious look in his eyes.

“Suppose that our side, the Multi-Race Coalition Force, wins the war. As the victors, how will we treat the defeated Human Al-

liance Force? At best, they'll be treated as inferior people, and they might even become slaves. Shouldn't we keep things how they are? That way, the only races being oppressed would be the ones with low populations. After this war, the number of people being oppressed could increase a hundredfold. That makes me think..."

It makes me think we should stop the war now...

Before I could say it, Kon used his magic to produce text before my eyes. "Master, didn't we join this war to break that cycle? That's why we're cooperating with demonic races and the elf race."

"That's right, but it was naïve. I've been far too naïve. They're not just going to forgive and forget several hundred years of oppression. There might be humans like Joachim who can accept a cat sith as their wife, but most humans see non-human races as inferior. And the non-human races see the humans as inferior. The only reason we're working with the demonic races and the elven race as equals is because we're visiting this world from another one. Victoria and her kind don't think of us as ordinary humans."

Kon used his magic to produce more text. "Does that mean you want to give up now? Mother has said that we can return to the Hakone base. We can leave Noa to deal with all the unsolved problems. But there's no guarantee this world will be the one you're hoping for after those problems are solved."

"Then what am I supposed to do?!" I exclaimed. "You heard what Joachim's wife and that Merkava knight told me, didn't you?! The way things are now, if we could somehow have each race agree to live in a different territory, then maybe those different races could tolerate each other. But now the alliance is about to start using ghouls. They may be using them already. How are

other races ever going to forgive humans for doing something so stupid?!”

While I was venting my built-up frustration by yelling at Kon, he slowly floated up to the height of my face, and he gave me a powerful slap with his tail.

“Calm down! You may still be young, but in this world, you’re the commander of the northern front forces as one of Noa’s generals. Remember who you are.”

“That hurt, you damned lizard! I never asked to be a general. I didn’t even want to be involved in this war! The only reason I’ve felt the need to get involved in any of this is because my mom doesn’t listen to anything I say! So why do people act like I’m here to save the world? They should have never dragged me into this.”

“Then why didn’t you contact Mother while you were in command? You could have spoken to her at any time using your personal terminal. An email would have been enough. Could it be because deep down inside you thought things would work out somehow? If you really hated your situation, you could have done something. It’s too late to cry about it now!”

I know! I know it better than anyone. Kon is completely right... but I never imagined the humans of this world could be so stupid. Why would they be so desperate to get rid of us that they’d put themselves at risk? Why can’t they join hands with us? It’s so stupid...

I couldn’t hold back my tears any longer and I started crying pathetically. Kon was more sympathetic now. After I cried for some time, I looked up and saw that Kon had produced some text.

“Have you calmed down now?”

“Yeah, sorry. And thanks.”

Kon was pleased to hear me say so, and the text soon disappeared. His tail swished back and forth as if he was thinking about something, and then some new text appeared.

“Master, what type of world would you like this to be?”

“A world where everyone can smile,” I said. “A world where people can protect the things most precious to them.”

The idea may have been laughably childish, but that was the world I wanted to see. A world where everyone was smiling and holding hands. A world where everyone could be happy.

“Well then, let’s make that world. This is no time to be shut up inside your room.”

“Did you listen to anything I said?” I shot back. “It’s impossible. The alliance and the coalition just can’t—”

I was about to go over the whole thing again, but then Kon produced more text, and I couldn’t help but smile when I read it.

“Why is it impossible now? Your mother is known as the greatest genius in all of history, and your father commands the strongest military unit. We also have the demon lord Victoria who rules over demonic races; an elven princess; and Marvelus and Lirin, the highest ranking and most powerful dragons in this world. And you have the respect of every single one of them. How can anything be impossible for you? Haven’t you always found it easy to do things that everyone said were impossible? You used Mother’s Equation to prove the existence of parallel worlds, you opened the moon relic... There are things that people all over the world said were impossible, things that only you could do. You may think it was all by chance, but it doesn’t matter if those things happened as such. You can just succeed by chance again

this time, if that's what you need to do."

Kon's opinion didn't make a lot of sense. But for some reason, it made me think I could somehow lead the alliance and coalition toward peace.

What I needed to do now was think of a concrete plan for dealing with the ghouls. I was certain from their name and nature that these creatures were the zombies I'd seen in movies in my past life.

"All right. Let's go talk to Mom about dealing with these ghouls!" I said with relief. "I do have a few ideas about that. Thanks, Kon. You've really lifted my spirits."

"Kon!" he happily responded.

He sat in his usual position on my shoulder and coiled his tail around my neck to hold himself in place. He must have been growing, because he felt a little heavy lately. I petted his head as I got up to leave the room. Kon then deftly used his tail to produce some text as if he'd just remembered something.

"You know, I've been thinking about the way you're always calling me a 'lizard' or a 'damned lizard'... I'm biologically female. And when you consider that I was only born recently, you could say I'm a little girl. You could at least call me 'lizard girl' or something."

I stared at Kon, dumbfounded. "You're joking... right?"

"What? Isn't it obvious from looking at me? I'm an elegant little lady. Take a good look. I have these delicate white scales! Isn't their texture amazing?"

I think I'll ask someone else to bathe Kon from now on... Maybe Mom or Clare.

I was trying not to think too hard about it as I headed for the CIC, where I expected Mom was waiting.

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Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I was in the CIC of the *Alice* studying a map of the surrounding area and developing a strategy for the near future when a pale-looking Clare returned to the room. I'd sent her to fetch Kouki, but she appeared to have returned alone.

I wonder what happened?

I asked her, "Is something wrong? You don't look very well."

"N-No. The major general... Kouki yelled at me. I've never seen him make a face like that. It was a little frightening."

Kouki yelled at Clare? She must have said something to upset him. Though even then, I can't imagine that being enough to make Kouki yell at her. Kouki's so mild-mannered, and he's not the type to show strong emotions like that. You could call him reserved, or you might say he's introverted, but either way, he's normally easygoing. It's why he can never turn down his friends' requests. Though that might change as he gains more life experience. So what could have gotten into Kouki?

Shuuichi, who was operating a terminal beside me, also looked curious.

"What did Kouki say?" Shuuichi asked. "He's not the type to yell without a reason."

"All I did was tell him that Miki wanted to see him. Normally he'd come with me right away, but he just sat there on his chair and wasn't moving. So I urged him on by saying that Miki wanted to see him as soon as possible..."

"And that made him yell at you?"

Clare looked at her feet and replied with a quiet, “Yes...”

This is odd. Kouki wouldn't normally get upset over something like that.

“Clare, did anything about Kouki seem unusual at the time?” I asked.

Clare replied immediately as if she'd already thought about it. “The only light in the room was from a desk lamp. The main lights were off. Kouki is normally reading a book or watching a documentary, but he was just sitting there on the chair thinking.”

“That's odd,” Shuuichi said. “I've never seen Kouki act like that. I wonder what's up with him.”

Shuuichi was right. The room we prepared for Kouki aboard the *Alice* was in the center of the ship and had no windows. For him to sit in that room thinking with the lights off and then yell at Clare when interrupted wasn't like him.

What could have happened to Kouki? I folded my arms and tried to think of an explanation.

“Please forgive me for interrupting your meeting, but I may be able to shed some light on the matter,” Captain Dylan called up from an area below us.

“What is it?” Shuuichi replied while lighting a cigarette.

“It's only been five hours since Kouki returned to the *Alice* after capturing the imperial capital. Kouki wasn't behaving at all strangely at that time. Do you agree with this assessment?”

I saw Kouki myself when he returned, and he hadn't been behaving strangely at all. Shuuichi and Clare also nodded to the captain in agreement.

“In that case, I can only think of one thing. Roughly three hours ago, Kouki was speaking with Lord Joachim’s wife and a knight from Merkava. I didn’t think it unusual that he’d talk to Lord Joachim’s wife; Kouki does find human-animal races to be particularly interesting. But I remember thinking it was strange that he’d be discussing things with a knight from the Merkava Kingdom.”

He spoke with a knight from the Merkava Kingdom? And then started acting strangely... Don’t tell me?!

“Clare, Princess Cassis is resting in another room. Contact her and ask her to find the knight that Kouki was speaking to immediately! Issue a formal summons if you must. Hurry!”

If my fears were correct, I’d be justified in using the full weight of my authority to discover the truth.

If the worst of my fears was correct, our only choice would be to confine Kouki to the Hakone base.

I was sure that would be the best thing for Kouki and this world.

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Ten minutes later, an out-of-breath knight dressed in the armor of the Merkava Kingdom entered the CIC. Princess Cassis looked worried as she entered after him.

“I heard from Lieutenant Colonel Clare that you had some questions for me,” the knight said.

“I believe that you were talking to Kouki three hours ago. Please tell me what you said to him.”

“Indeed. I shared with him some things that are common knowledge in this world that Noa calls G-88. We spoke about the treatment and rights of demi-humans. In particular, I told him how our brethren have been treated as slaves.”

The knight continued to stand at attention as he confirmed my worst fears.

“How could you?!” Princess Cassis said to the knight in a voice that was close to a scream. “Were you not told that Kouki was never to hear of this?! It was the first article of the alliance treaty that binds the kingdom and Noa. Your actions are a blatant violation of our treaty!”

The knight replied, “I heard nothing about that.” The color was draining from his face as he gave excuses for his unintentional but devastating blunder.

The Merkava Kingdom doesn't have reliable information management systems like we do, I thought frantically. Failures of communication and instructions arriving too late are problems that are bound to happen once in a while, but I never imagined it would happen over something so important. At any rate, we need to act fast...

“Clare. Please disable the activation system of Kouki's suit, the *Satanachia*. Don't do it on a software or systems level. He'll find some way to override it and activate the suit. Physically remove the main thrusters and piloting unit.”

“Understood.”

“Shuuichi, would it be too much to ask your subordinates to remain fully armed and on standby? We can't rule out the possibility of Kouki breaking through the alliance forces in an ordinary powered suit.”

“All right,” my husband said. “How many men will you need? The landing unit assigned to security inside this craft has only ten personnel capable of being mobilized immediately.”

“If Kouki made a serious attempt to escape and it was me trying to capture him, I’d want to have one powered suit brigade and three infantry divisions ready. You should be ready to prepare a force on that sort of scale.”

I overheard a crew member operating the radar quietly say, “That’s a little much,” to himself. But he hadn’t seen what I saw.

Soon after the Hakone base had become fully operational, around the time powered suits had been able to start using the training area, Kouki and I went to see it for ourselves. Kouki ended up trying out a mass production model of powered suit used by ordinary military units.

I remember seeing how happy Kouki looked in the footage sent from the camera inside the powered suit he was using. I happily watched the test along with everyone else who was present, but after a few seconds, I hadn’t been able to believe what I was seeing.

He was performing three-dimensional maneuvers in a suit equipped with only jump thrusters. He was launching himself into midair off the structures in the training ground as if wall jumping, and he was using the jump thrusters to accelerate to speeds that wouldn’t normally be thought possible.

When Shuuichi saw the video footage, he warned me, “Don’t tell anyone about this video. It would be a major blow to the confidence of most of our powered suit pilots if they saw this.”

As his wife, I understood Shuuichi’s excellence better than anyone. If someone like Shuuichi thought so highly of Kouki’s abilities, it would take a lot for us to be able to pin him down.

“Ha, what now, I wonder?” I felt I couldn’t help but laugh at the situation.

I pushed aside naïve thoughts like, *Kouki is very understanding, so I’m sure he’ll listen if we just talk it over.*

What I actually thought was, *No matter how gentle he might be, there’s no way he’ll forgive the humans of this world.*

I looked back at the desk and saw that Shuuichi left behind a pack of the cigarettes he was always smoking. I stopped smoking completely when I became pregnant with Kouki, but now the urge to smoke was so strong that I couldn’t resist. By coincidence, Shuuichi and I had always preferred the same brand of cigarettes. I picked up the pack and found there were several cigarettes left inside, so I put one to my mouth and lit it.

“That’s odd. It doesn’t taste good at all. Did they always taste like this?”

Everyone was looking at me with concern; they didn’t know how to react to me talking to myself.

That reminds me. Shuuichi is the only one who knew that I used to smoke. I’m sure everyone is surprised.

I felt the calming effects of the nicotine for the first time in a long while. When roughly half of the cigarette had been reduced to ash, Kouki suddenly entered the room, his eyes looking swollen.

He must have been crying. I stood up from my chair and Kouki walked toward me looking full of determination.

“Kou, what took you so long?” I said to him.

Kouki simply shook his head in response. He walked over to

the desk where everyone was gathered and looked at the face of everyone present in turn before asking, “Mom... I have a favor to ask. Lend me your strength.”

“What?”

The atmosphere was tense. No one spoke, and the only sound was the working of the CIC’s instruments. Everyone was waiting for Kouki to speak.

“I want to rescue civilians from areas threatened by ghouls.” My son spoke with conviction in his voice. “Lend me your strength so we can save all races, regardless of whether they’re part of the coalition force or the human alliance. There’s no point in continuing this war.”

Kouki’s words brought a smile to the face of everyone in the room. Kouki had matured more than I expected. I knew it was a foolish idea, but I agreed and decided we’d aim for a brighter future.

“Of course we’ll cooperate!” I said. “You can always count on your mom. Did you have a plan in mind?”

“Yes, I have a plan. But you’re getting too close! Move back. You smell like cigarettes.”

Kouki stepped back looking disgusted. It came as a shock, and I didn’t know what to do. I realized that the room was too cramped for a strategy meeting and that I’d have to get more people involved.

“Clare, contact everyone involved and tell them that a strategy meeting will commence in Consultation Room A ten minutes from now. I’m going to go brush my teeth.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw everyone begin to move. I

picked up Shuuichi's pack of cigarettes that had been the cause of Kouki's disgust and crushed them in my hand before throwing them into a trash can. I had to hurry so that I'd have time to brush my teeth before the meeting began.

I trotted off in the direction of the bathroom.

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Shuuichi Arakawa's Point of View

A card on the desk that read “no smoking” caught my eye as I entered the conference room and took my seat.

I guess Miki asked someone to put that here. Did it really bother her that much when Kouki asked her to move away? Well, it says no smoking, so I can't light up here. I pulled out a pack of nicotine gum from my pocket and threw a piece in my mouth.

“Commander, will our unit be deployed?” asked Louis, who was sitting by my side.

How should I know?

“No idea. Just make sure everyone under your command is ready to sortie at any time.”

“Understood.” Louis used his personal terminal to send instructions to his subordinates.

Having nothing to do, I looked around the room and noticed that Miki and Kouki were having a discussion by the side of the screen. Every time Kouki asked a question, Miki pulled a face and became absorbed in using her terminal. Despite that, she somehow looked as youthful and beautiful as always.

Behind them, I saw Clare and Elise setting up a large display screen. That would probably be used so that personnel who were on the island could participate by video link.

“Kon!”

I was surprised when I suddenly heard a voice by my feet. I looked down and saw Kon looking up at me.

“What is it?” I asked. “You want me to pick you up?”

Kon nodded in response and reached out toward me with two small front legs. I couldn’t help but smile as I picked up the dragon. Kon agilely leapt out of my hands and onto the top of my head.

Is Kon coming to me because he couldn’t see Kouki? It made me feel a little sad as I closed my eyes and waited.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I heard Clare say. “We’re about to begin our anti-ghoul strategy meeting. Could everyone please take their seats?”

I opened my eyes and saw that the lights had already been dimmed in the conference room and Kouki stood waiting beside the podium. It looked as though the meeting was about to start. I sat up straight in my chair.

Clare began, speaking as the facilitator. “Our policy will now be explained by Special Major General Kouki Arakawa, who is the author of the materials on ghouls that has been distributed to everyone’s terminals.”

Clare stepped down from the podium and Kouki took her place. He appeared tense as he looked at the audience gathered in front of him.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Kouki Arakawa. The war started on October 5th, five days ago, and since then, we’ve continued fighting up until the capture of the imperial capital this morning. I’m truly grateful to everyone for their efforts so far. There are many people with injuries both major and minor, but so far, no member of the coalition forces has died. This is in part because you’ve all shown a high level of skill, but it wouldn’t have been possible if we didn’t have multiple races working together. I hope that there will be even stronger unity between us in the future.”

Kouki stopped speaking to take a drink of water from a glass before continuing.

“We, the Multi-Race Coalition Force, have been successful in accomplishing one objective after another. But if we continue to progress in this way, it will likely result in the collapse of the major nations and satellite nations that make up the human alliance. Roughly half of this continent is now under control of that coalition. After we began our operation to capture the imperial capital, the alliance started using a biological weapon known as a ghouls as a last resort to repel the coalition force. As I predicted, these ghouls are now rampaging through the outskirts of the Recule Holy State and the capital of the Capus Kingdom, causing tremendous harm.”

It was as Kouki said. Just from looking at the footage that the intelligence department had sent us, it was obvious the alliance didn't have the ghouls under control. They were like a plague of flesh-eating locusts.

“Noa is in possession of state-of-the-art weaponry,” he said. “It wouldn't be impossible for us to continue advancing while exterminating those ghouls. Cities destroyed by the ghouls would be much easier to occupy than cities where garrisoned alliance soldiers would need to be eliminated first. All we'd have to do is kill anything that moves. Future historians would say that the loss of human life was the price that had to be paid to save the continent from ghouls. But would that really be enough?

“We'd be saving ourselves by killing blameless people who we could've saved. Wouldn't that make us no better than the alliance?

“I don't like that idea. I don't want us to be like the alliance. At times like this, the coalition has to prove that we're different from them. We have to stand up against the terror of ghouls! It doesn't

matter what race we are, we all need to cooperate!”

Kouki took a deep breath.

“Thus, I’m proposing a large-scale evacuation operation: Operation Future.”

Just as Kouki finished speaking on the podium, my terminal vibrated to inform me that I received an email. I noticed it wasn’t just me; everyone in the conference room had received an email.

I opened the email and started reading through an attached file that contained a description of Operation Future. I only got as far as the first line before I felt the need to object.

“This makes no sense... You plan to evacuate ten million people?! And in just 24 hours? It can’t be done!”

Louis, sitting by my side, looked equally surprised.

What’s Kouki thinking? I thought incredulously.

As the conference room became filled with the expressions of disbelief, it was Clare who was the quickest to come to her senses. She spoke loudly to calm down those around her.

“Silence! Please remain silent. Major General, please continue.”

This made everyone focus their attention on Kouki once again.

“This operation involves three stages,” he said. “In the first stage, we evacuate civilians from regions that we expect have been damaged by the ghouls. Based on information from our satellite and the intelligence department, we expect that there are between six million and ten million civilians in those regions. The full power of the coalition should be used to transport those civil-

ians to safe areas. Once 50 percent of these people have been moved to safety, the operation will enter the second stage.

“In the second stage, we’ll capture the leaders of the Recule Holy State, the Capus Kingdom, and the Ragille Principality. The captured leaders will be put on trial by countries who didn’t participate in the war once the war is over. It’s important that they’re captured alive.

“By that time, we should have evacuated 90 percent of the civilians. Regardless of whether the evacuation was a success or failure, we’ll move to the third stage after confirming that all of our forces have returned safely.

“In the third stage, we’ll use an imaginary number bomb to completely destroy an area with a 2,000 kilometer radius covering all of the regions where ghouls have appeared. The operation should take 24 hours. Those 24 hours will change this world completely. Are there any questions?”

This needs more than just a Q&A session! I have so many questions, I don’t even know where to begin!

The more I read about this operation, the more uneasy it made me feel. The food, medicines, and shelters for the evacuees would all come from Noa’s supplies. And the refugee shelters were going to be in the Merkava Kingdom’s territory with the army of the Ursna Empire keeping the peace.

This is just too much. It’s like...

“Kouki! How is this any better than a defeat for the coalition?” Princess Cassis burst out.

She said the very words I was thinking. The princess was glaring at Kouki and trembling with rage, though it made me smile a little because she reminded me of Miki when she was angry.

“You’re not happy?” he asked.

“My happiness is irrelevant. If I announce this plan to my people, there will be an uprising!”

“Then be ready to quell an uprising. You are royalty, aren’t you, Princess Cassis? That problem is your responsibility.”

“...Gah!”

Princess Cassis had no idea how to respond, so she bit her lip and sat back down.

This is no good. I realize there’s sense in what Kouki’s saying. These were always the coalition’s ideals. It makes me a happy father to see how much he’s grown. In any other situation, I’d go over there and hug him right now. But he needs to think more about the feelings of others around him. He won’t win anyone’s cooperation by acting so high-and-mighty. He’s a smart boy, so I’m sure he knows this. And why isn’t Miki intervening? I found my wife’s behavior suspicious.

“This is more than I can endure.” It was empress Victoria who objected next. “Is the alliance to go unpunished for invading my territory?”

“Punish them? What good would that do?” Kouki demanded. “Do you want to go through this all over again? Yes, if they were punished, there’d be a short peace after the war, but I’m sure history would repeat itself. And then it’s going to be our children and grandchildren fighting. Victoria, do you want to put your children through that? You’d prolong this foolish battle for future generations to inherit?”

“I suggested no such—”

“As I said, we’ll use an imaginary number weapon. We’ll

launch it from a special missile launching system. And my suit, the *Satanachia*, is the only one in this world equipped with the right kind of launching system.”

“Do you mean to say...”

“If the civilians of the alliance aren’t evacuated or if they haven’t gotten out of the evacuation area after a given time limit, I’ll detonate the weapon to protect the coalition. Victoria, you need to be ready for that, too.”

I couldn’t help but cover my face with both hands. Now I understood why Miki wasn’t stopping Kouki. It wasn’t just her; nobody here could stop my son.

To carry out this operation, he had to be prepared to kill ten million people.

**

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“If the civilians of the alliance aren’t evacuated or if they haven’t gotten out of the evacuation area after a given time limit, I’ll detonate the weapon to protect the coalition,” I said. “Victoria, you need to be ready for that, too.”

Victoria opened her mouth to speak, but she had no words. She probably expected me to say something naïve like always.

The idea that I might have to kill ten million people made my palms sweat with fear, and my legs had been trembling uncontrollably for some time already. But I couldn’t turn my back on this war.

Without meaning to, I looked in the direction of Kon, who was sitting on Macho Man’s head, and I saw her looking right back at me.

Don’t worry, Kon... I listened to what you said. I won’t run from my responsibilities anymore. I’ll take on the worst tasks myself.

“Very well. You have the cooperation of the Ursna Empire,” she said at last. “If my subjects protest, I shall deal with that as it happens.”

Victoria finished speaking, sat down, and began to discuss something with the maid beside her.

It was my mom who had the power to make final decisions for Noa. And I could leave Kon to oversee Marvelus and the others. The remaining problem was the Merkava Kingdom, which was controlled by Princess Cassis.

Isn’t there a way to get her cooperation? Feeling stuck, I

looked to my mom for help.

Mom had been silent until now, and when I looked at her, she stood up and spoke to Princess Cassis.

“Princess Cassis, I realize that the heaviest burden will fall on the kingdom. Your concerns are well-founded: providing us with space for refugees also means maintaining public order and distributing supplies. But please think of the advantages. If this operation is successful, the kingdom will hold a great amount of political influence on this continent despite being such a small nation. Whatever happens, you’ll have saved the continent from crisis. Provide Noa with the space we need to tackle this crisis, and we’ll never forget the kingdom’s brave decision to stand with us.”

I’m not surprised the head of the three witches of Noa is talking Princess Cassis into it so skillfully, but I wonder if now is really the time to make that kind of promise, I thought. Well, I guess she’ll make it work. This is my mom, after all.

“Do you mean it?” the princess asked.

“Yes. As long as you uphold the ideals of the coalition, the kingdom will always have Noa’s full support.”

“Very well. The Merkava Kingdom will cooperate with Noa.”

Mom nodded to me, and I faced the attendees once again so I could give my orders as the special major general.

“The operation will commence in eleven hours. Your instructions will be constantly updated, so please remember to check them periodically. Meeting adjourned.”

I breathed a sigh as I watched everyone leaving the room. Macho Man then walked over to me with Kon still sitting on his head. He placed a hand on my head and ruffled my hair.

“Dad... that hurts,” I complained. “What do you want?”

“I was just thinking that you’re becoming a good man. You sure you’re ready for this?”

It was rare for him to praise me so directly, so I nodded silently, feeling a little embarrassed. Kon then climbed into her usual position on my shoulder and grabbed on to my neck.

Macho Man grinned at the sight of the two of us. “We’ll be gearing up to head out as soon as we’re done checking our equipment. I don’t think we’ll meet again until this operation is over. Leave the second stage to me. I’ll make sure it succeeds.”

“Okay. If you mess up, the whole operation will fail. Make it work, no matter what.”

Macho Man said, “Got it,” and left the conference room together with Cote.

All that remained for me to do was load the missile onto the *Satanachia* and remain on standby. Though I’d have to visit Noa Island so I could pick up the missile.

I turned to Mom, wondering if my suit was finished being inspected and refueled. “Mom, is my suit ready to go? I want to fetch the missile from Noa Island.”

Mom turned around and checked something on her terminal before answering. “Yes, it’ll be ready to leave in a moment. Once the thrusters and piloting unit have been reinstalled, it’ll be ready to go at any time.”

Reinstalled? Why would they take it apart for an inspection? I guess my suit is such an important part of this operation that they had to inspect it extra carefully...

“All right. I’m off to Noa Island,” I said. “I’ll be back after I’ve picked up the missile.”

Then I left the room and headed to the hangar.

**

It had been an hour and twenty minutes since I launched from the land battleship *Alice*, and now the sun was beginning to set.

Come to think of it, I haven’t slept at all since capturing the imperial capital with Lirin and the others last night...

I rubbed my tired eyes with my right hand as Kon began growling and gesturing toward the monitor with her tail.

“Kon! Konkonkon.”

“What is it? Have you found something?”

I let my suit hover while I aimed the main camera in the direction Kon was pointing to and zoomed in. The shape of a person was displayed on the monitor, but the area was too dark for me to make anything out. I switched the camera to night vision mode using an instrument panel to my side.

“It looks like a person. What’s that behind it...? That’s a ghoul! I can’t believe they’ve spread so far already.”

The enlarged image showed a man holding a child and frantically running from the ghoul behind him. I immediately disengaged the safety on my weapons and was about to shoot the ghoul, but Kon produced some text in front of me before I could open fire.

“Master, there are more ghouls between us and the people headed this way.”

Damn! If they get any closer, the ghouls in front will notice them. There must be something we can do. Should we shoot now? No, we can't. Bullets passing through the ghouls would injure the people behind. I need to warn them, but I don't know how to do it.

Oh, that's it! I'll use the roar.

After accidentally using it that one time, I totally forgot I had it equipped. I jabbed the button full force and began firing my rifle into the air.

“GYRAAAH!”

A roar that sounded just like a distorted violin rang out across the evening sky. At the same time, a muzzle flash was produced from the rifle making me visible to everyone looking in my direction.

Don't come this way! The fearsome Satanachia is here. Go somewhere else, I prayed as I watched the monitor screen.

Thankfully, the people seemed to decide this monster was more terrible than the ghouls behind them, and they changed direction.

“Great. Now we can open fire on the ghouls safely.” I breathed a sigh of relief before landing and aiming my rifle.

I started up the unfamiliar firing system, got the targeting reticle into position, and was about to pull the trigger. But something didn't feel right, so I took my finger away from the trigger.

“What's wrong?” Kon questioned.

I ignored the message. I needed to think with all of my concentration.

Why did the ghouls in front of me stop? They were chasing after the humans at full speed, but now they've suddenly stopped. There has to be a reason. What happened just before they froze?

“...I made the roaring sound and fired my rifle.”

If they reacted to the light of a rifle, they would react similarly to things like magical explosions. If it hadn't been the light, the cause could only be the cry the *Satanachia* produced when I used the roaring device.

Could this be a way to control the ghouls?

“Kon! Use my terminal to search through the intelligence department's databank. Try to find footage that includes the sound of ghouls and then extract that sound.”

“Konn!”

Kon followed my instructions and used her tail to operate my terminal. I watched her from the corner of my eye as I extracted the noise used by the roar device from the *Satanachia*'s information system. If one coincidence had been followed by another, then by some string of coincidences it was possible that the roar of the *Satanachia* and the voice of the ghouls...

“Master! I've found it. Here's the audio data.”

I took the data that Kon gave me and loaded it onto the suit's main terminal so I could view the sounds made by the *Satanachia* and the ghouls as waveforms.

I knew it! These two waveforms are virtually identical.

I couldn't believe how quickly Kon had been able to separate out the sound of the ghouls from the other creatures that were

found together with the ghouls. It really demonstrated how skilled an ancient dragon could be.

“Good work, Kon. Thanks to you, this won’t take long at all.”

I petted Kon’s head as I began programming some new basic sounds for commands to congregate, advance, retreat, disperse, and more into the roar device.

I’m so glad I got Shingo to teach me the basics of programming! When I get back to the Hakone base, I’m buying him whatever food he wants.

“All right. Let’s try it. We’ll start with a retreat, followed by an advance, and then stop.”

I flicked the switch on the device to create the sound, and the ghouls moved according to my instructions. I wanted to study their reactions to figure out how to create more precise instructions, but before that, I needed to contact Mom.

I used a terminal to the side of the monitor to send a transmission to the CIC of the *Alice*.

“*Alice*, do you read me? This is call sign Goetia, Kouki Arakawa. I’m transmitting from the *Satanachia*. Could you please relay this transmission to the personal terminal of Miki Arakawa?”

“Understood. Please wait a moment.”

I waited some time before getting a response. Then I heard Mom’s voice together with some background noise. “Kou, it’s me. What’s wrong?”

“Um... I figured out how to control the ghouls.”

“.....Oh. I see. Sorry, could you give me a moment?”

“Okay.”

Mom forgot to put me on hold and ran off somewhere. I heard the sounds of footsteps running through a corridor followed by a loud slam of a door being thrown open. Then I could hear her talking to someone.

“My son found a way to control the ghouls.”

“Huh?!”

“I need to confirm this. Have the reconnaissance satellite ready within five minutes.”

“Wha?!”

Mom, five minutes is asking a little much. Give them a little more time than that. I'll bet the personnel of the engineering department are used to my mom giving them unreasonable requests... I'll have to do something nice for them.

I waited, imagining the crew changing the angle of the satellite with tears in their eyes. Then I heard my mom's voice again.

“Can you hear me? I can see you right now in the satellite image. Try making the ghouls back off, then call them back toward you.”

I made the ghouls move just as she said.

Mom was silent for a while, as if deep in thought. Finally she sighed and asked, “Is there a limit to how many you can control? And are you sure you're not in any danger?”

“I don't think there's any limit. They probably consider the Sa-

tanachia to be the leader of the pack because it has the loudest voice, so I think it's just limited by how far the *Satanachia*'s cries reach. There's no danger. Ghouls can't break through a powered suit's armor."

"...Okay. Here are my orders as the chief executive of Noa. We're changing Operation Future. Special Major General Kouki Arakawa is to use the *Satanachia* to take control of all ghouls on the continent. I'll determine which route you should take and where you'll receive fuel and food."

"Understood."

"Good luck," Mom said before ending the call.

With changes being made to an operation that had already been running on an unreasonable timescale, I was sure that the *Alice* would be so busy, it would be something like a battlefield.

I used an instrument panel to bring up the new route that had been plotted for the *Satanachia*.

"Looks like we'll start by heading to a town in the east. All right! Let's go, Kon."

"Konn."

It made me smile to see how enthusiastic Kon was, and I made the *Satanachia* begin walking east.

**

An electronic beeping sound woke me up and I was a little surprised to find myself in the dimly lit cockpit of the *Satanachia*.

That's right... I decided to take a nap at the fifth supply point.

I looked down and found Kon curled up into a ball and sleeping on my lap. “I’m hungry... Let’s see what food we have. Wake up, Kon. It’s time to eat.”

Kon awoke with a yawn and produced some text that floated in front of me. “Just give me a can of peas.”

Wow, what a weird choice.

I rummaged through the bag of food that had been dropped by a transport aircraft at the second supply point. I found the can that Kon wanted and a can of seasoned rice for myself. I removed the tops from both and gave Kon’s to her.

I watched Kon greedily stick her head into the can while I ate mine with a fork. Naturally, the food was cold.

“I wish we could eat something hot,” I said to myself.

“I’d love to eat some of your mother’s stew right now,” Kon responded with some floating text.

Stew would be nice, but Mom’s curry is good, too.

Next, I picked up a chocolate bar to eat for desert, but as soon as Kon was done eating her own food, she leapt up and grabbed the chocolate out of my hand.

“Hey! That’s mine! What kind of lady snatches food away from other people?”

The self-described little lady on my lap ignored me and began chomping at the chocolate bar while clutching it in her little paws.

Okay, fine. That’s our only chocolate bar, but I guess she can have it.

I didn't feel like snatching it back from Kon after seeing her happily munching on it with narrowed eyes. I gave up and drank from a pack of water using a straw.

"Are you going to drink some?" I asked. "Do you know how to use a straw?"

Kon nodded. She had no trouble putting the straw into her mouth to suck up the water. Her paws and the area around her mouth were still covered in chocolate.

She really is a lot of trouble... I took a wet tissue from the same bag and wiped Kon's mouth and paws.

"Don't move while I'm trying to clean you. Didn't you say you were a girl? You shouldn't let yourself look so messy."

"Gruu..."

It wasn't a threatening "Gruu"; it was more like a sound a cat might make when it's enjoying the attention. Kon appeared to be happy. It was the noise she always made when Alice was spoiling her.

After reminiscing about how Alice would always smile as she wiped Kon's mouth, I decided it was time to face the image on the main monitor of the *Satanachia*.

"Okay, time to face reality. Let's activate the main monitor."

I turned on the monitor while trying not to imagine what was happening outside. The scene that was displayed made me want to go punch whoever it was from Noa's engineering department that raised the image quality of these cameras to the absolute limit.

I was surrounded by countless ghouls. It was nighttime before

I went to sleep, so the image hadn't been as clear. Now that the sun had risen, I could clearly see the ghouls that were standing all around me.

“...How many of those things are there?”

Kon answered my question: “I used the linked satellite to count them. There are about 30,000.”

That many?! Well at least they won't keep multiplying, since we're about to move them to an uninhabited area and set off an imaginary number weapon.

The missile had already been lowered down to me with my supplies before I took my nap, and it was now loaded into the missile launching system of the *Satanachia*. I was heading north as instructed.

“Kon, we're headed for the final point on our route,” I told her before sounding the “advance” roar.

We traveled north for two hours before Kon turned away from the terminal she was using and happily swished her tail to produce some text. “Father's unit has succeeded in capturing the leaders. It looks as though the whole operation is a success, Master!”

“Dad actually pulled it off? That's great. That means the war is over. A lot of people were injured and a lot of bad things happened, but now...”

I trailed off as an unidentified armed unit came into view on the monitor. They were positioned in front of me and carrying flags with the image of a pair of scales and a wolf on a white background, as well as some plain red flags.

What is this? I didn't know what to make of it so I sent a trans-

mission to the CIC of the *Alice*.

“*Alice*, do you read me? I’m sure you can see it already, but there’s an armed force ahead of me. Who are they?”

“We are currently investigating. Please wait a few moments.”

Clare was the one who replied from the ship. When I apologized for yelling at her before leaving the *Alice*, and said I wanted her to continue acting as my personal adjutant, she’d forgiven me with a smile. Even now, she was taking good care of me.

“We have confirmed that this force is the regular army of the Conet Federation. The red flag is a warning flag meaning, ‘approach and we will attack.’ Please change course without approaching them. The point where you’re currently standing is the border between the Recule Holy State and the Conet Federation.”

“Clare, has the federation issued any statements about the harm caused by the ghouls? And which side of the border is the army positioned on?”

“No, the Conet Federation hasn’t issued any statement, and isn’t on the list of nations that have offered to provide aid. Strictly speaking, the place where the army is standing is the territory of the Recule Holy State.”

Hm... So they’re just watching over the continent’s crisis without speaking out or doing anything to help? I suppose that much is forgivable. They might not have the strength to offer any aid, and they could have their own internal problems to deal with. But to top it off by transgressing the border of their neighbor and declaring that they’ll attack if approached? They must be feeling quite confident. Those guys are just asking for trouble.

“I’m not changing course,” I replied while trying to contain my

anger. “I’m going to continue heading forward, and I’ll change direction at the point we already agreed on.”

“Major General?! That would be... No, I understand. In the worst-case scenario, make sure they fire the first shot. Ensure we’re not the aggressors.”

“Understood.”

After Clare gave her warning, I ended the call. Of course, I had no intention of attacking them, but the federation needed to be taught that their behavior could have consequences.

I moved the *Satanachia* until it was just in front of the federation. I stopped 500 meters away from them.

The 30,000 ghouls that I brought just stood quietly behind me.

The members of the federation stood there looking at each other as time passed, and eventually, they lowered the red flags.

“That’s right. You’ve made the right choice. Go back to your own nation,” I muttered angrily to myself.

Kon grabbed onto my arm as if she was concerned.

Don’t worry. This won’t escalate further...

I smiled and made the “advance” roaring sound before hurrying toward the area where we’d activate the missile.

**

When we arrived at the activation point, we worked together to make the final preparations. The ghouls were densely packed together so that the explosion range could be kept to a minimum.

Once I finished my share of the work, I rolled up the activation code for the warhead, and turned to Kon.

“Kon! I’ve done my part. The blast radius will be the minimum of roughly three kilometers, and the missile will detonate in 120 seconds. Have you finished setting up the escape boosters?”

“I’ve finished. We can make our escape at any time.”

I was reassured by the floating text that Kon produced. I took another look at the ghouls.

These ghouls are the victims of this war...

I would never forget this scene. I’d make sure this story was passed on to future generations so nothing like this could ever happen again. For the sake of a future where everyone could live and smile.

“Kon... let’s go.”

I buckled myself in and ignited the boosters. The *Satanachia* started to rapidly accelerate as we began our escape. The vibrations were incredible as we broke through the sound barrier. As I endured the G-forces, I watched the image on the rear main camera and saw a sphere of black light produced by the detonation of the missile warhead. This was probably the miniature black hole that Mom had told me about.

I watched it gradually grow larger as it engulfed the surroundings, then I closed my eyes and prayed that the ghouls would find happiness in the next life.

Miki Arakawa's Point of View

I watched the satellite image of Kouki leading the ghouls to the detonation point.

How must he feel right now? By pure chance, Kouki has a huge number of ghouls under his command. There's no way to protect him from feeling the misery of war. I worried about what that might do to Kouki's mental state.

Shuuichi had recently returned from the battlefield. "Even so, it's an incredible sight," he said. "Together with the appearance of the powered suit Kouki's using, it's... I don't know how to put it, but it's, you know."

Shuuichi was struggling for the words, but there was no way to sugarcoat it; what we were witnessing looked just like an army under the command of a demon. The other personnel in the CIC were watching the screen with wry smiles.

"You're right. I had the same thought myself. But I worry. By chance, it was Kouki who had to see these ghouls close up. I hope this doesn't affect him too much."

"Miki, do you really think he was able to command the ghouls just by chance?"

"What are you suggesting?"

I didn't know what Shuuichi was trying to say.

If he could control them for any other reason besides chance, Kouki would have told us so from the start. He's not the type of boy to stand back and watch while people are pointlessly sacrificed!

I angrily defended Kouki to Shuuichi, but he replied with a calm and serious look on his face. "You believe that he knew about their weak point, but he hadn't come up with a plan for handling them? And even before the war started, he was trying to hurry you into installing that roar device. Why would he do that? Don't you suspect that he predicted this whole thing?"

"He can't have... I won't believe it. It's not possible."

"Kouki was shaking while we were talking in the conference room. At the time, I thought he was worrying about the possibility of sacrificing ten million people, but what if he was just angry? What if he was angry at this world and at us because we stopped moving forward? If his only concern was our ability to prosper here, then perhaps his plan was to use those ghouls to lay the world to ruin if we weren't willing to keep moving forward."

That's not possible. That's absurd nonsense, and I won't believe it. But this is Kouki... How long has he been preparing for this? Since before the war? Since we first visited this world? From the moment he opened the moon relic? Could it be that he really can see the future?

"I don't know," I replied. "I sometimes wonder how much he can see."

"Who knows? But whatever he can see, that doesn't change the fact that he's our precious son."

"That's true."

He's exactly right. No matter how much other people fear him, Kouki is our precious son. Even if no one else understands him, we'll try to understand him. I firmed my resolve.

Clare then informed me of a new development while she was operating a terminal. "We have word from the alliance via the

Merkava Kingdom. They are willing to surrender.”

“What are the surrender conditions?”

“None. Unconditional surrender.”

“Very well. Please accept.”

Clare received my instructions and began sending out instructions to various places. It looked as though the war was finally over. We’d been so busy lately that I suddenly felt ten years older.

When I looked back to the screen, the imaginary number weapon had been detonated and a black hole appeared. It was working exactly as the theory predicted, and Kouki had escaped the danger zone safely.

I know! I’ll make his favorite stew to improve my mood. He’ll be tired when he gets back, and I’m sure it’ll make him happy.

I told the personnel from the political department that I had work to do elsewhere. They desperately tried to stop me, but I ignored them and headed to the kitchen.

I was known for being a workaholic, but even I needed to take a break once in a while to stop myself from breaking down.

Chapter 8: A Gift

Kouki Arakawa's Point of View

“Personnel wishing to use the gate should proceed whilst remaining in line.”

I heard the announcement as I stood in line for the gate that would take me back to the Hakone base. Today marked three days since the conclusion of the war between races, and I received an email from Mom when I woke up telling me to go back to the Hakone base. I didn't mind going back. I hadn't seen Alice and Shingo in so long. But...

“I can't even see the entrance to the gate...” I mumbled to myself.

“Kon...” Kon replied unhappily from her position on my shoulder.

I was just wondering how long we'd be waiting before we could pass through the gate when I heard the sound of a motorcycle with its throttle fully open. The noise made me turn around.

“Hey, isn't that Cote?” I said.

That's good timing. He should be able to take me back to Earth with his priority pass, since he's using the goods route. He can just carry me as one of his goods.

I wave my hand at him until he noticed, and he came closer with his motorcycle.

“Kouki, you headed back to Earth, too?” he asked.

“Yes. But I don’t know when I’ll get through the gate. Are you allowed to carry me on your motorcycle? I don’t suppose you’d mind carrying me as goods?”

Cote rubbed his jaw with his hand as he thought about it and then replied, “I don’t mind. But have you ever ridden on the back of a motorcycle before? It might be a little dangerous...”

“Don’t worry about that. I know how to ride one.”

Don’t worry, Cote! I can ride behind you no problem. In my past life I died in a motorcycle accident, so riding tandem is nothing compared to that.

“All right, then. Sit behind me.”

I thanked Cote and climbed onto the motorcycle. We started moving slowly.

“Don’t you have work to do, Cote?” I asked. “I thought my dad’s unit was providing security today.”

“I’m acting as their contact in the Hakone base. I’ll be transporting any equipment they need if there’s an emergency.”

That makes sense. I thought that type of job was always given to Clare or Elise, but I guess everyone takes their turn.

“I was thinking it would be nice to give Victoria some sort of present from Earth,” Cote added.

“Victoria? You mean *the* Victoria?”

“Right. We’re dating.”

“...Oh, okay.”

Cote sounded happy, but I wondered whether she'd really consented to that. *I don't think he'd force her to spend time with him. Though it's hard to imagine Cote getting a girlfriend without using any tricks when he has the face of a killer.*

"Let me guess, you're another one who thinks that I'm pressuring her into spending time with me?" he asked.

"Th-That's not what I was thinking! I know you're a good person. I believe in you."

"I don't mind. Even the commander was asking me, 'You did get her consent, didn't you?' so I'm used to it already."

Wow, even a moron like Macho Man was worried. Well, Cote is so kind that he even takes care of little kittens. I'm sure that's what drew Victoria to him. But what about the present...? She's a demon lord who already has pretty much everything she could want, so Cote could have a hard time picking something. I want to help him out, but... I suppose there is one thing.

"Cote, to thank you for letting me ride on your motorcycle, I'll share some information with you."

"Hm? What's that?"

"A while ago, Victoria was asking about the brand of perfume that one of Noa's female officers was wearing. Cosmetics on Earth should be much higher quality than what she's used to. I'm sure they'd make her happy."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll try giving her some perfume next time I see her."

I was still talking about presents with Cote when we passed through the gate and emerged in the Hakone base. To me it felt as though I'd been away from Earth for several months, and it was

strange to think that only a few days had passed since I parted with Alice and my friends. I thanked Cote as I climbed off the motorcycle and moved over to the sidewalk.

Cote called after me, “Kouki! I forgot to tell you. The orichalcum sword is finished. It’s in the armory on Noa Island, so go pick it up whenever you have time.”

I forgot about that. I guess I can look at it later. Right now, I just want to see Alice.

I thanked Cote with a smile and began walking quickly toward Alice’s room.

**

I stood outside the room allocated to Alice and briefly made sure that I looked okay before pressing the intercom. I heard movement from inside the room, then the door opened and there was Alice’s face looking out at me.

“Alice, long time no—”

“Konn!”

Before I could even say hello, Kon leapt up from my shoulder and dived into Alice’s chest.

That damn lizard! I should be able to dive into Alice’s chest, too!

“Wah!” she cried, startled. “Kon learned to fly!”

“Kon! Konkon.”

“Ahaha, that’s great. They taught you?”

“Konn. Konkon. Konkonn.”

“Oh? There are more of your kind in the other world?”

I watched as Alice spoke with Kon as if speaking to a small child. *This is so nice. I feel like I can forget about the terrible things I've seen in the war. Though I hope I get a chance to talk to her, too... Wait... Kon isn't using text. How can she be talking to Alice?!*

“W-Wait a minute,” I burst out. “Alice, how can you understand what Kon is saying?”

“Kon?!” Even Kon herself sounded surprised.

Is there some new sort of translation device? I wondered, but Alice replied with something even more surprising than that.

“Hm? Well I just understand Kon's gestures. And Kon has such a wide range of facial expressions... Are you saying that you can't understand Kon?”

How would I? I don't care how many facial expressions she has, she looks no different from a lizard. If Alice can understand Kon, she's clearly the weird one here, not me.

I looked at Kon and saw that she was looking back at me with her head tilted in curiosity. Alice must have noticed that both Kon and I felt as though this was a little strange.

“Let's go inside,” Alice said, sounding flustered. “I want to hear more about this other world.”

She beckoned us into the room, and I entered with a wry smile. We sat in the feminine-looking room drinking tea as I talked about the several months I'd spent in the other world.

I did my best not to mention the war or the ghouls, and Alice listened with sparkling in her eyes as I told her about life in the

Ursna Empire and how cool the orders of knights in the Merkava Kingdom were. I'd been talking for about three hours, when I suddenly realized that something was bothering Alice.

"Alice, what is it?"

"It's just..."

"What?"

"I want to go to the other world, too!" she burst out. "I want to ride on Lirin, the white dragon you mentioned."

I wasn't the one who rode on Lirin. That was Kon! You can't just go up to the queen of the dragon race and say, "Let me on your back!"

I tried to think of a way to make Alice give up on this idea, but then Kon produced some text floating above the table.

"Lirin will let you ride her if I ask her. She's a very kind dragon."

"Really?!"

Oh, right... Kon is of a "god-race," so she ranks above a queen.

"Kon, I hate to say this, but... won't that bother Lirin?" I asked hesitantly.

"Don't worry about that. Dragons have more free time than they know what to do with. And there's something I need to ask Lirin about."

Well, that's fine, I suppose. We've been back for three hours, so three days have passed on Noa Island. Now should be a good

time. If we go through from Earth now, we can get there by hanging onto the manufacturing plant that they're transporting... It just depends whether it's a convenient time for Alice.

"If it's a good time for you, I think we could go there and ask Lirin right now," I said.

"Really?! I'm ready to leave right now! I was about to go for a walk outside the base when you arrived."

"Oh. That explains why you're wearing camouflage gear."

I thought it was just her loungewear, so I hadn't asked.

I made sure not to let my misunderstanding about Alice's interests show on my face as I took her by the hand and opened the room door.

**

When we passed through the gate and returned to Noa Island, the people who'd been standing in line were mostly gone. I looked over at Kon and saw that she'd created a green sphere with magic and was holding it with both paws.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"I'm calling Lirin," Kon replied.

Kon threw the sphere into the air. At first it looked unstable as it gently floated upward, but once it reached a height of about ten meters, it suddenly accelerated and disappeared into the sky.

I really should tell Mom before we go on a sightseeing trip with Lirin, or she might be mad when she finds out. I didn't want it to be like the time I'd set out to get the orichalcum, so I sent her an email.

“So why did Joachim marry a cat sith?” Alice asked me. “I thought they were persecuted where he’s from.”

“I asked him about that same thing,” I replied.

“Tell me!”

I shared the story that his wife Miinya had told me. “When Joachim was still young and in training, he met Miinya after injuring himself in a forest. He was hungry, wounded, and close to death. Fortunately for him, Miinya happened to pass by.”

“It’s a good thing she wanted to save him. They don’t like humans much, do they?”

“No. But she didn’t want to just leave him there to die. She was carrying a magic remedy, so she poured it into his mouth, and she was about to leave him there... but then a monster appeared in front of her.”

I was putting a lot of feeling into telling the story, and Alice and Kon were holding each other as they listened.

They were acting just like this back in Alice’s room. I guess these two liked hearing stories.

“Miinya was too scared to move, but then she heard a sound from behind her and turned to see that, despite his injuries, the remedy had healed Joachim enough for him stand and draw his sword.”

“And then?! What happened to them?”

“Joachim stepped in front of Miinya and fought the monster to protect her. After a difficult battle, he somehow defeated it. And that was how they met.”

“Wow, Joachim is amazing.”

Well, this is a story I heard from his wife, so it's probably exaggerated. The next part is all about how he singlehandedly defeated a swarm of monsters attacking a cat sith village. It's like a heroic fairy tale about overcoming danger and finally getting married after many twists and turns. And when you consider that she shared the story with me in exchange for dried fish, it's not very believable.

I wasn't sure how to tell Alice the truth of the matter, so I decided to stay quiet about the dried fish. Then a magic circle appeared in the sky.

“It's so pretty...” Alice said. “Is this magic?”

“Yes.” Kon's tail waved proudly back and forth as she produced the text. “I can't use it myself yet, but this is transportation magic used by the dragon race.”

It was a long time since I'd seen magic. I forgot how impressive it was to see a massive magic circle appear in midair.

As I gazed at the circle, a white dragon slowly emerged and flew overhead before landing in front of us.

“Kon, Kouki, it has been a while. I'm sorry it took me so long to get here.”

“Konn, konkonkonn. Konkon?”

“No, not at all. Would the three of you like to ride on my back as I fly around this area?”

I understood nothing Kon said, but she must have asked Lirin to let us ride her.

Lirin lowered her beautiful wings to the ground and said, “Please, climb onto my back.”

“Thank you for letting us ride you, Lirin,” I said to her. “I’ll climb on right now, if you’re sure it’s okay.”

“Lirin, thank you for agreeing to this. I know it was selfish of me to ask,” Alice said.

“Kon!”

Although Alice and I said thank you before climbing on her back, Kon haughtily climbed on and made herself at home for some reason.

I really need teach her about restraint and modesty...

Alice must have had the same thought. She poked Kon’s cheek and told her off for behaving so arrogantly.

“I’m about to take off,” Lirin warned us before flapping her wings.

Noa Island rapidly grew small in the corner of my eye while I gazed at Alice, who was sitting beside me. I’d never seen her look so happy.

“Aren’t you glad, Alice? You’re on the back of a dragon, just like you dreamed.”

“Yeah! It’s amazing. We’re flying so high and so fast.”

Seeing Alice so excited made me grin, too.

“Did you finish talking to Lirin, Kon?” I asked. “You said you had something to ask her.”

“Yes, I did. Though I didn’t learn what I want to know.”

Kon looked lonely as she walked toward me with her text floating in the air. It was enough to make Alice stop humming to herself and look at Kon with concern.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “If something is bothering you, you can talk to me about it.”

“You can always talk to me, too,” Alice added.

“Marvelus gave me a box that I can’t open. Mother said it’s an item from a house in this world, but there’s some magic on it, and no one can open it.”

I was still reading the text when Kon took a box from a magic circle that was about the same size as her and showed it to us. It looked just like a treasure chest from a typical fantasy world. When I looked at it more closely, I noticed there were ornate engravings all over its surface.

If these things are like the magic circles that appear when using magic, then it’s going to take some fairly complex magic to activate it all.

I studied the engravings by tracing my finger over them. Alice became interested and reached out to touch the box in the same way. As soon as her finger contacted the box, there was a flash of blue light and the lid opened.

“Kon?! Kyuu... kyuun.”

“What happened? Are you all right?!” Alice asked Kon, who suddenly burst into tears.

Large tears ran down Kon’s face as she clutched the box to her chest, her body shaking. I felt something wasn’t right, so I tried to take the box away from Kon, but then I heard the faint sound of music.

“Kouki, do you hear that?”

“I hear it. It sounds like a music box.”

The faint sound of music was coming from the box that Kon was holding. *Does this music have some sort of meaning to Kon?*

I petted her head and asked her in a gentle voice. “Have you heard this music before?”

“It’s a lullaby passed down by the dragon race. And the magic from the box is similar to my own. This must be my mother’s magic.”

This music box must have been created by Kon’s mother. She passed away before Kon was born, so this must be the first time Kon has ever felt her mother’s kindness.

“I’m happy for you,” I told Kon, who was still holding the music box. “Make sure you treasure it.”

She was still crying as she replied with a loud and happy sounding “Kon!”



Afterword

Hello, this is Nyun. I'm very happy to speak with you all once again.

The truth is, while I was in the process of revising this second volume, I suffered from acute cholangitis and needed surgery to have my gallbladder removed. It was announced on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* that I was suffering from a stomach ulcer, but the true cause of my symptoms was my gallbladder. That's why I'd like to use this afterword to deliver a message I've been wanting to share with everyone: If you have a problem, go see a doctor right away!

Fortunately, I was diagnosed quickly and it didn't turn into an emergency, but I dread to think what might have happened if the problem hadn't been discovered so quickly. That's why I urge anyone feeling unwell to see a doctor as soon as possible.

I'd like to change the subject and talk a little about this volume of the novel. I really didn't want to change the story in this volume, so it's virtually identical to the version published online. On the other hand, the third volume that I'm writing right now (on November 11, 2015) will be very different from the outset. I'm sure it will surprise everyone, and I hope you'll be able to enjoy a different world once again in the next volume.

If I let this afterword grow too long, it'll cause problems, so I'd like to lay my pen down at this point. I've been working hard on volume 3, so please look forward to it.

I'll see you all again in volume 3!!